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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

The PC Gaming Authority

OMG! VISTA BETA 2! P. 102>



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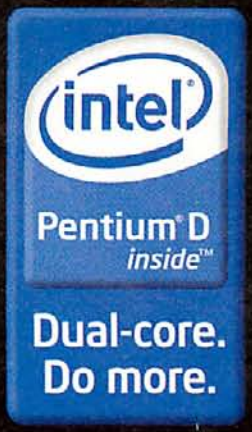
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Hit Points: 60 / 64

Designer: You!

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II DREAD LORDS

FIND

TURN

LIVE BUILD REIGN

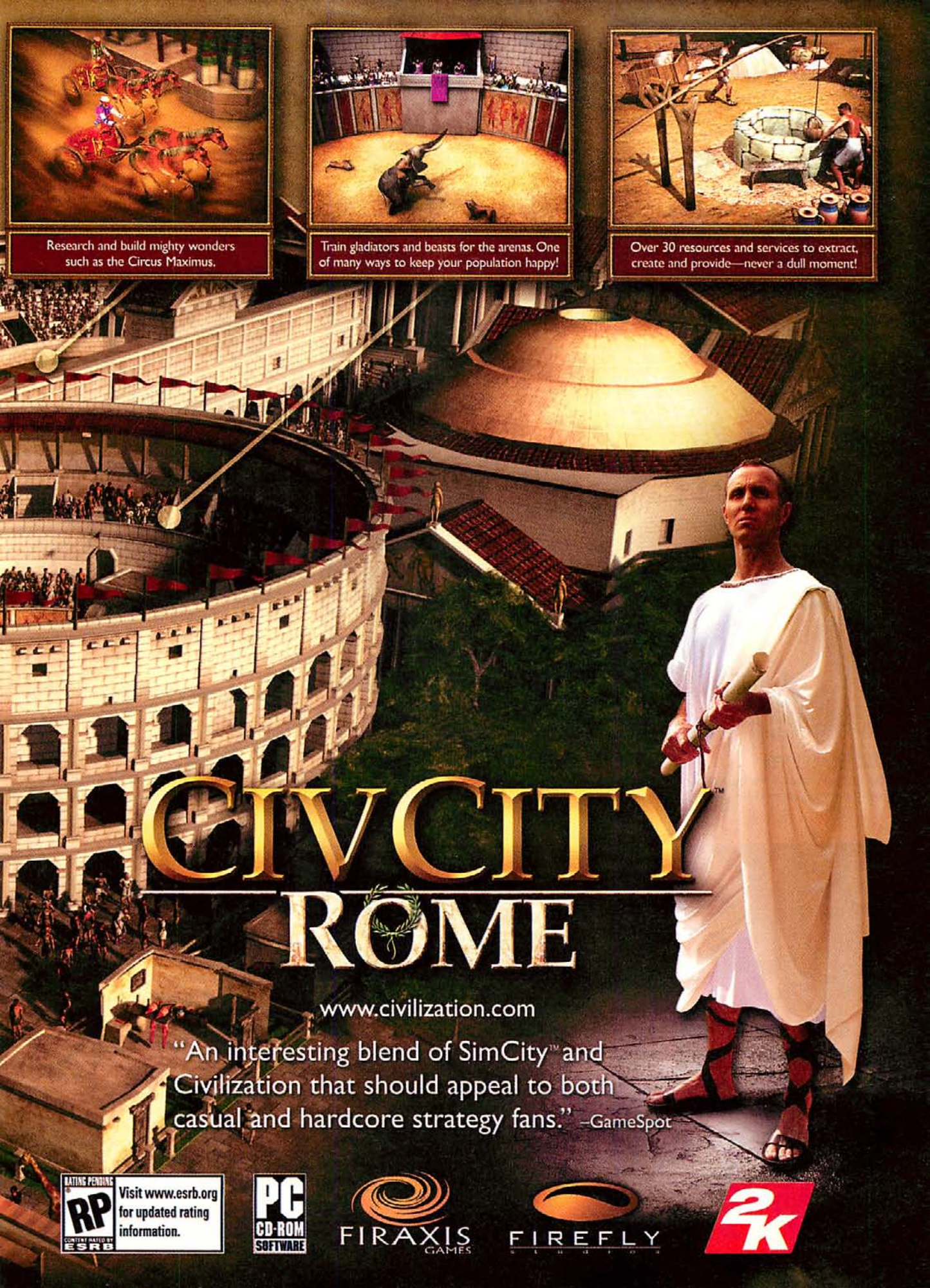


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■ COVER STORY

SAM & MAX

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Our editor-in-chief is having a total geek spaz-out over the new Sam and Max game. It's a bit sad.

14 Letters
We love our readers. Especially the ones who are furries.







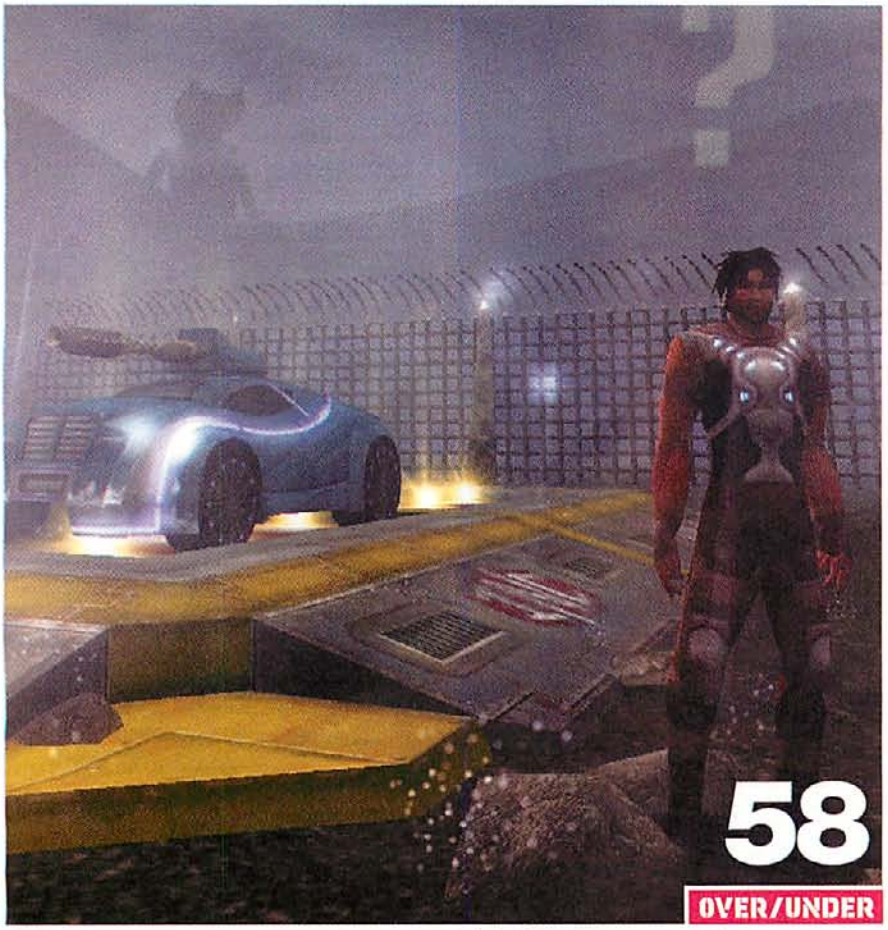


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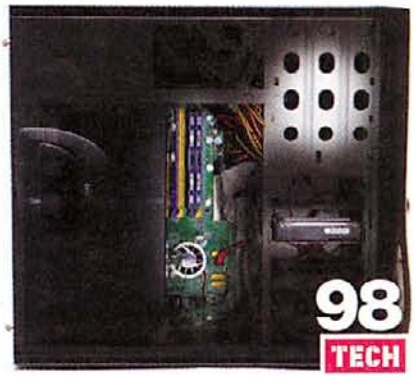
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Congratulations on your purchase of *Age of Rising Legends II: The Sword of Xanthor*!









THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

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CGW.1UP.COM
Can't get enough *Sam & Max*? Hit 1UP for an exclusive video tour of *Sam & Max* developer Telltale Games' studio!

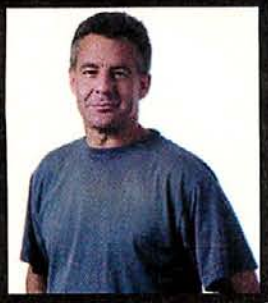
GROGNARDS.1UP.COM
Attention war-gaming nuts: Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's blog for even more hardcore ponderings on this underappreciated genre.

CGWRADIO.1UP.COM
Why read what the *CGW* editors have to say when you can listen to their geeky, whiny voices instead? Join the fun and find out why all the girls are going wild.

EDITORIAL 265

OF LAGOMORPHS AND CANINES

Yay! They're back!



IN THIS MIXED-UP, MUDDLED-UP, SHOOK-UP WORLD of ours—with soaring gasoline prices, scary global conflicts, and the inexplicable box-office success of *Garfield: A Tale of Two Kitties*—it just seems like we never get any good news anymore.

But if you flip back to the cover of this magazine, I think you'll agree that we can—for a moment, at least—lay down our angst and *weltschmerz*, and give out one big, fat, hearty "YAY!!!" Yes, Sam and Max, everyone's favorite furry private investigators, return to the PC at long last, and you can read all about it here in these very pages.

If you don't know who Sam and Max are, you're in for a treat, as Steve Purcell's cartoon dog and "hyperkinetic rabbity thing" or, um, "lagomorph," as Max prefers to be called, are two of the great comic book characters of the 1980s—and also starred in one of the best adventure games ever made—LucasArts' brilliant *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, way back in 1993.

In the 13 years since that game, more than one attempt was made to revive the series, but nothing ever came of it. Now, finally, it's happening...with Steve Purcell himself on board, along with the good people at developer Telltale Games (many of whom are LucasArts vets). Mr. Purcell and company were infinitely gracious with their time and energy on this story, so here's a public shout-out to them. And thanks for the cover drawing, too, Steve!

Can you tell I'm excited? Sue me. After playing roughly 100 humorless and boring *Myst* clones for over 10 years now, I have the right to be excited when a classic comic franchise returns. And you do, too.

/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *Prey, Rise of Legends*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

OVERRATED/UNDERRATED



SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Overrated: My ability to debate Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety* with strangers on the bus.
Underrated: Talent for turning insects' scientific names into poetic anagrams.
Now Playing: *Rise of Legends, World of WarCraft*, lots of DS games
1UP.com Blog: cgwsean.1UP.com



DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

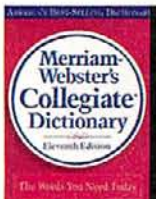
Overrated: Darren Gladstone.
Underrated: 12 trained chimps at a computer keyboard.

Now Playing: *Titan Quest, Prey*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (VIEWPOINT)

Overrated: My unflappable calmness.
Underrated: Angry Ryan (Jeff's reaction to this picture: "You look like you stepped out of *Reservoir Dogs*." Believe it.)
Now Playing: *Rise of Legends*
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com



SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (RADAR)

Overrated: Underrated.
Underrated: Overrated.

Now Playing: *Half-Life 2: Episode One, Prey, Battlefield 2: Armored Fury*
1UP.com Blog: egmshawn.1UP.com



LOGAN PARR
FILEFRONT LIAISON

Overrated: People think I'm a neat freak. If only they could see my desk at work....
Underrated: My night vision. It's just something all of us Kiwis have.
Now Playing: With the new cat who recently joined the household.
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com



MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Overrated: Orcs.
Underrated: Trollocs.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 2*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com



SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Overrated: Gravity.
Underrated: B-A-N-A-N-A-S.

Now Playing: *Burnout Revenge*
1UP.com Blog: the_dallaskidd.1UP.com

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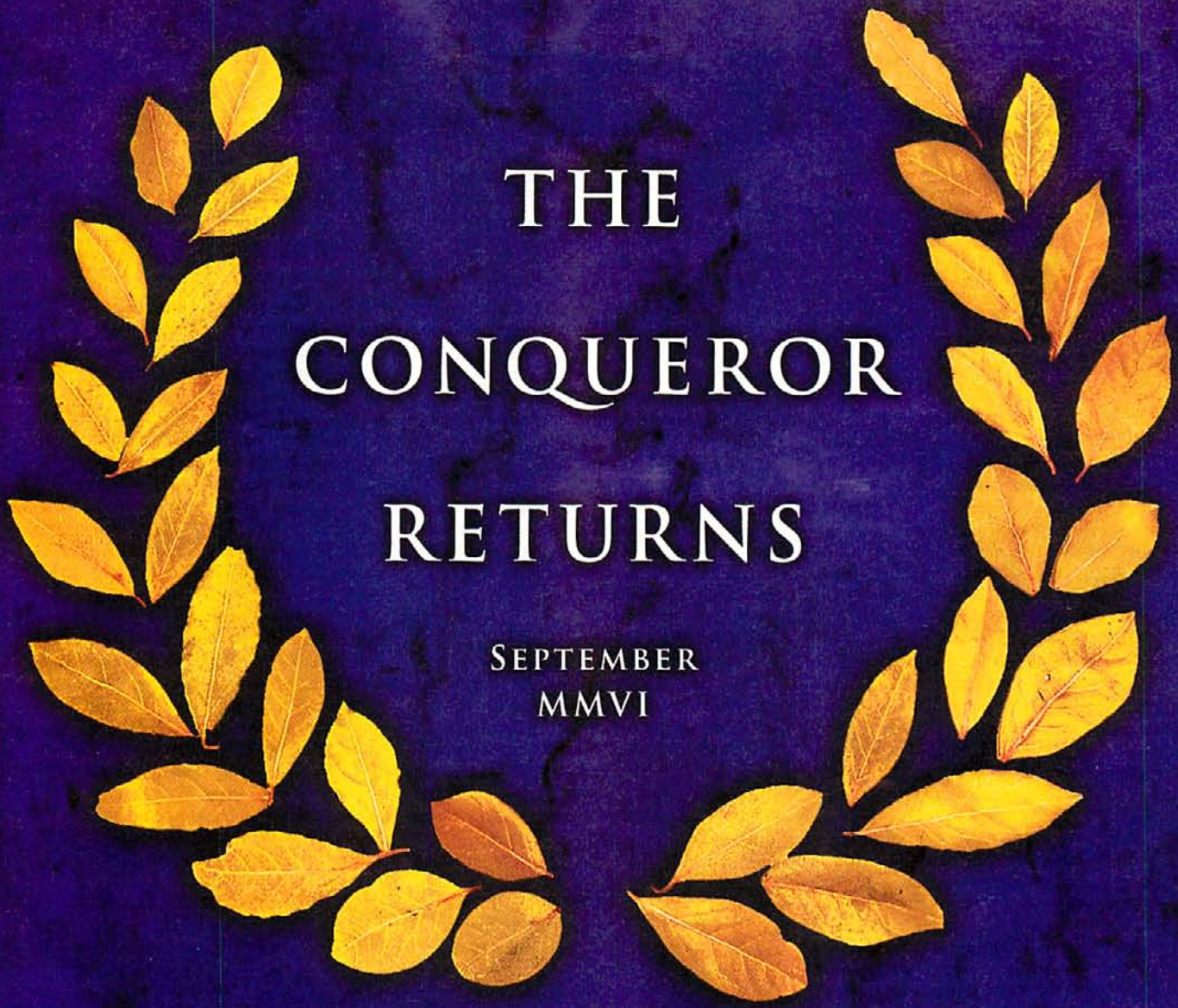
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LETTERS

YOU SHARE BECAUSE YOU CARE.

LETTER OF THE MONTH



Hey, CGW! Just wanted to put in my two cents about the recent announcement of Blizzard's motion picture based on the *WarCraft* universe. My reaction actually occurred in stages, as follows:

First: w00t! Been waiting for this since I first heard rumors of it years ago! Badass, man! But then doubt enters my mind: A *WarCraft* movie? After all these videogame-to-film flops? Then some renewed belief: But if anyone can do it, Blizzard can! I'm back on top of the world.

The final feeling, which continues to concern me, however, is the fact that it will be a live-action film. Whaa? Blizzard has made such beautiful in-game movies over the years with CGI; why would they switch now? I know this will get me some flak, but I was not a fan of the *LOTR* movies, primarily because of all the big-guy-in-a-rubber-suit-that's-supposed-to-be-an-orc nonsense. So, while I delight in the idea of a *WarCraft* movie, I question Blizzard's rationale behind deciding to make it live-action rather than computer-done as in the past. I quote your own magazine, re: *WC3*: "[N]o one with eyes and a brain can argue with the virtues of the game's absolutely incredible cut-scenes, which feature some of the best CG animation ever. Someday, Blizzard should just go for it and make the movie it's obviously dying to make." So ask yourself, "Is it?"

Steve

Sure, a live-action *WarCraft* movie sounds a little scary, but just imagine some of the casting possibilities! Natalie Portman as a night elf! Jack Black as an orc! Joan Rivers as a troll! The possibilities are endless!

BAD EDUCATION

As much as I love reading your material, I think your magazine has caused me far too much trouble at school to justify paying some odd sum per month. It all started with your June 2006 issue. I was reading your article about keyboards and mice ("Play with Me") [*CGW* #263] while skipping class and listening to a CD player. It felt like somebody was watching me, so I turned and



discovered the creature to be a teacher. Interrogation soon followed, and she went to the nearest classroom. I thought I was being busted for the CD player, but no! It was your stupid magazine. She thought I was looking at pornographic material. Consider you and your dirty article names fired.

(Note: Please pardon my sarcasm. Without your magazine, there wouldn't be stories like this to tell.)

Nic

We publish a series of controversial articles on sex in games, and your teacher busts you for an article on...keyboards? Someone really must do something about the state of public education in this country.

WE PREFER SEX, TOO!

I was appalled to read Chad Engler's letter in the July 2006 issue [*CGW* #264] decrying sex in favor of "violence, drugs, and alcohol." I would much rather hear about sex than death or pain. I know it's hard to remember sometimes, but violence is usually ILLEGAL in the real world. And sex is part of most people's lives (or at least they WANT it to be). Doesn't it seem a little unhealthy to have a society that believes violence is more acceptable than sex?

John Evans



SPORE PREQUEL?

I loved all the propaganda about *Spore* [*CGW* #263, June 2006] and am now awaiting my chance to evolve! But no mention of *SimEarth*, Will Wright's earlier effort to play planetary god? Anything you can tell those of us who remember that one?

Jon Elliott

Why don't you tell us, since you're so smart?! But, yeah, you're right, *SimEarth* was an earlier attempt (1990) at a somewhat similar theme, but it was rather wonky and complex. *Spore* should be much more user friendly.

OH, SURE—NOW YOU CORRECT US!

Well, after reading *CGW* #255 [October 2005] again (yes, in the bathroom) I noticed that you messed up on page 30 in your *F.E.A.R* article. Look at the pictures on the left. I think you mixed up the captions on the pictures. Either this magazine is a giant quiz to us geeks on how to look closely at things, or you just messed up. Either way: HA HA HA HA HA HA HA LOLZ N00BZORS I PWN U. I win.

Fish

Dude, you're reading an article from last October. We've been making mistakes for 10 issues since then. Please get with the program and criticize our newer errors. Thank you.

A NEWER ERROR

So, great magazine, had it for a long time, but recently I noticed a little blurb in one of your Rumor Mill bubbles [June 2006], which stated: "Are all things radioactive destined for delay? [The fact that] *Fallout 2*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* and *Duke Nukem Forever* are all supposedly still happening, say so." Is that right? *Fallout 2*, eh? *Fallout 2* from 1998? Surely you couldn't be referring to *Fallout 3*? No, I wouldn't think so, because such a reference in your magazine without telling more would raise the tortured spirits of posta-pocalyptic gamers from their harshly lit crypts to smite such a blasphemer, much like doomsayers on June 6th. A mistake, yes—but more so: a devious deception. I salute you!

Fallout Fanatic #45219

And we salute you back! And so does our Copy Desk, which had to edit your letter! So, see, we all make mistakes! Yay!



FURRY CORNER

Your response in your podcast to that one listener's question about whether or not you guys are furries was completely unnecessary. You are following the typical stereotypes about how furries are perverts and how they find animals sexy. If you read the link that I so thoughtfully supplied to you, you will find out that a very small percentage of furries actually support the adult themes. I am sure that I am not the only one offended by your ridiculous answer. Next time, do a little research before commenting on a topic that you do not at all understand (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Furry_fandom).

Schwimmwagen21

Actually, we all kind of did have a thing for Jessica Rabbit, now that we think about it.

MAIL BYTES

Hi. As a treat from last issue, I'm not complaining about doing away with the ratings. I don't really care.
—James

I love games, but to say they're art is just weird. I doubt I would ever see *The Sims 2* or *F.E.A.R.* playing next to the Mona Lisa.
—Adam Ruhoff

Those whining about no scores should put down the porn while on the pot and read something educational, like a game review.
—Dave

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SIERRA

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FROM FAR CRY TO CRYSIS

Five lessons Crytek learned

INSIDE



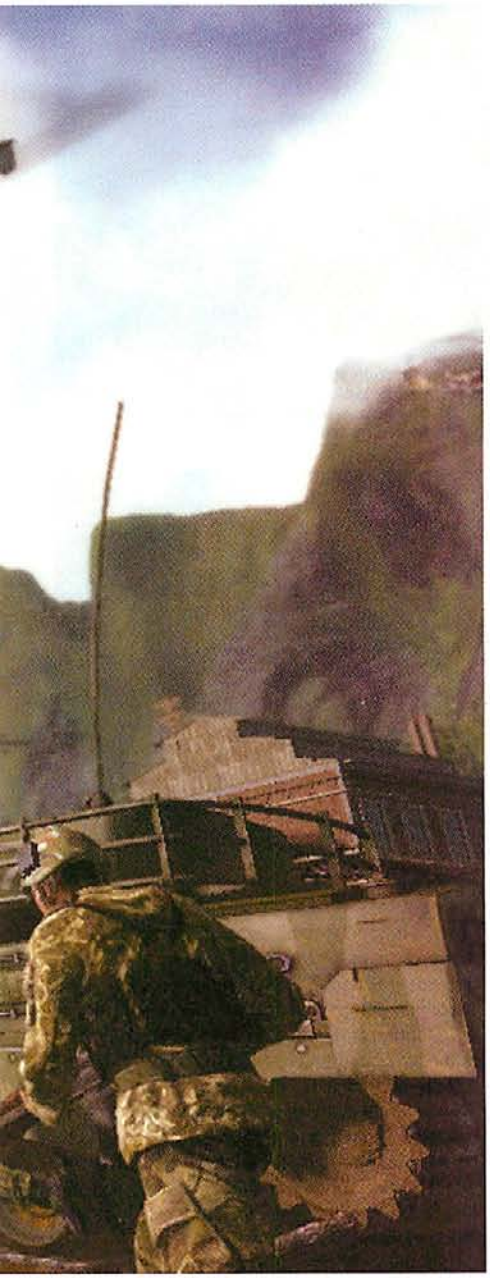
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PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Crytek** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **2007**



▲ ***"Far Cry* looked great, but was a bit stylized," says designer Cevat Yerli. "For *Crysis*, we wanted to push as far toward photorealism—or what we call 'videorealism'—as possible."**

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

1 STORY

As Crytek founder and designer Cevat Yerli has it, "*Far Cry* was *Island of Dr. Moreau*–inspired, and about a one-man army on a mission." With sci-fi shooter *Crysis*, Yerli's team drives toward dramatic tones, characters we can care about, and Oscar-worthy oomph—notions still hard to swallow in a genre that emotes with zam-pow. And plotwise, this *is* balls-out, Tinseltown fare. In case you've been sleeping: Zipping through space at asteroid speed, a UFO crashes in the South China Sea and supercools ground zero, crystallizing air and icing leaves like tropical chandeliers. America wants some. North Korea wants some. The zero-grav whatsits onboard want some.

"This time, we really wanted to ramp up the scale of the story," he says. "And although *Crysis*, too, is about one man ultimately saving the world, it carries a sizable supporting cast as well as story line and objective structures that definitely change depending on game events. For instance, if an ally dies, the story accounts for it. If you don't successfully defend against an alien attack, the game doesn't end—it adapts and alters your objectives. *Crysis*' dynamic story line does away with traditional A-to-B design. Death is the one and only losing condition."

2 A.I.

Crysis eyeballs open-path play in opposition to *Half-Life 2*'s hands-inside-the-car conservatism. Where rail rides say "suss out this context's ready-made purpose" (dynamite that door, splinter that support beam), *Crysis* nudges players to *create* context from natural contingency. It's the difference between baddies bunching up around flammable drums and soldiers scooting into defense formation when a silenced shot kindles the topped-off jerry can attached to their jeep (*Crysis*' hero Jake Dunn's cue to slink into the gully he glommed earlier to pass the patrol, or to pursue any number of other options Yerli says his game offers second by second, hour by hour).

"With *Far Cry*," he says, "we wanted to ensure that the human-versus-human combat was first-rate and felt realistic. When translated to combat against the [mutant] trigens, though, tactical realism suffered, and gameplay went from the unique experience of outsmarting an enemy to more standard run-and-gunning where the gamer simply out-reacts the enemy. We've significantly improved A.I. in *Crysis*. Adversaries are aware of their surroundings and actually use objects in the environment in natural ways. And, as with flesh-and-blood enemies, the alien invaders are coordinated, free-thinking, and brutally intelligent, and create a truly systemic play experience where the opposition reacts to and counters your actions."

3 MULTIPLAYER

"We have great expectations and are ensuring the multiplayer game gets attention," Yerli says. "Real-time player customization [via equipment modding and on-the-fly nanotech-suit manipulation] makes the traditional suite of modes more tactical than you're used to—plus, we've created a unique mode that we believe has the potential to build a significant online community." Yerli's mum on details, but he leads us to suspect something a little like multiplayer *Half-Life* mod *Science and Industry*, where familiarity with specific equipment improves efficiency and nabbing "artifacts" amps your war machine's muscle, allowing access to more and new weapons and vehicles. Furthermore, Crytek insists it's offering full support via a robust and user-friendly matchmaking system with leaderboards, clans, ladders, leagues—the whole shooter shebang.

4 VARIETY

"*Far Cry* was just jungle. It worked, but *Crysis*' environment is never the same once the terraforming starts," says Yerli, revealing the invaders' immediate rhyme and reason. "Imagine the jungle flash frozen—it mixes up interaction in ways that we'll reveal over the coming months."

» "*CRYSIS*' ENVIRONMENT IS NEVER THE SAME ONCE THE TERRAFORMING STARTS."

–CEVAT YERLI, FOUNDER AND DESIGNER



Although North Korea's commandos currently look uniform, Crytek insists each soldier's face will be unique from the next upon final pass.



If *Far Cry* offers any indication, each tank, jeep, and jet is yours to jack.



Radiance transfer, subsurface scattering, and...crates.

Additionally, the aliens are adapted to a low-gravity lifestyle, so expect a truly otherworldly environment with zero-G mechanics once you make your way inside the ship." Variety even takes to the skies surrounding the epicenter, where Crytek translates its commitment to free-roaming vehicles (and love of fighter-jock flick *Top Gun*) into jet combat.

GRAPHICS

Yerli, who dismisses id Software dynamo John Carmack's megatexture technology as neither new nor truly proprietary, is giddy about his own game's CryEngine 2. This is programming that talks—even more so in eye-tickling motion—and programming he loves to talk about. "Gameplay-enhancing graphics" are his watchwords; delivering a vision, not empty razzle-dazzle. Yerli canvasses its features as follows:

Dynamic terrain destruction and deforestation: "The ability to effectively modify terrain through the destruction of objects (trees and foliage in particular) creates emergent gameplay possibilities. Examples: Demolish a tree so that it falls across the road, creating cover or obstruction. Crack a frozen lake, forcing your opponent to fall into its icy depths."

3D environments: "New and innovative pathfinding techniques allow us to create scenarios that take place in three dimensions. The zero-gravity environment inside the invaders' spaceship places players in a completely novel situation (in terms of gameplay, too), while aliens intelligently navigate the topsy-turvy space."

Animation: "Our system allows for the creation of animation sequences that blend smoothly into one another without popping and sliding. CryEngine 2 deals with high-level A.I. system requests autonomously and selects the correct interpolation animations from the database." Cryptic talk aside, this is why Crytek defines its graphics goal as videorealism as opposed to photorealism. Great-looking screenshots aren't enough, since games—like life—move. And so, instead of passing through your point of view, the leaves and branches of *Crysis*' tropics bend around it. Rather than living at odds with their environment, feet fall on uneven ground, bodies seemingly absorbing impact.

High Dynamic Range: "CryEngine 2 renders High Dynamic Range throughout. This allows the whole scene to be darkened or brightened in response to an accurate model of the movements of the iris in real time, as well as [provides] enhanced detail in darker areas. Blooming effects simulate the real-world phenomenon of light diffusion through particulates in the air. Look up at the sun while you're in the forest—very cool."

Subsurface scattering: "Subsurface scattering models light as it spreads when passing through partially opaque surfaces such as skin. While the effect is quite subtle, we subconsciously notice that humans in the game, for instance, look that much more organic and lifelike."

Radiance transfer: "Also known as indirect lighting, this models light rays as they bounce about a scene—for example, the red light a Coke can disperses onto surrounding surfaces. An industry first, CryEngine 2 calculates this in real time."

Shadows: "*Crysis* draws on an algorithm that accurately models the soft edges on fully dynamic shadows we see in the real world." In layman's terms, when a leaf canopy sways in the wind, each and every blade and frond casts a twittering shadow copy.

Polybump 2: "More proprietary CryEngine 2 technology, this reduces ultrahigh-polygon models (5 million or more) to in-game assets while retaining the incredible levels of detail contained in them." / **Shawn Elliott**

>> "EXPECT A TRULY OTHERWORLDLY ENVIRONMENT WITH ZERO-G MECHANICS."

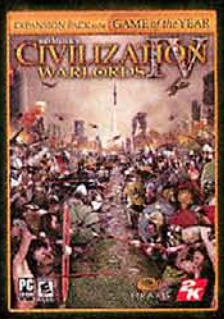
—CEVAT YERLI, FOUNDER AND DESIGNER

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FIRAXIS GAMES

2K



Speculate away: *Episode Two* allegedly includes some still-undisclosed multiplayer content.

HALF-LIFE 2:

Valve spills (and hides) more on the next installment

PUBLISHER: **Valve** DEVELOPER: **Valve** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

PREVIEW

A LITTLE SURPRISE: PROJECT LEAD David Speyrer is tightest-lipped about the *Episode Two* teasers we most want him to talk about. Combine Advisors (those pupae-like pods that ultimately escape the Citadel) are the "host bodies" Dr. Breen refers to, aren't they? And his brain/mind *is* now among them, no? Neither hot nor cold. Drop us a hint as to the nature of the Dr. Kleiner's "secret technological advances," we say. And is this the same project Mossman refers to from the Arctic? Nada. G-Man's signature briefcase is missing in the mystery figure's one and only appearance. What gives? Stone-faced again, Speyrer isn't saying, isn't insinuating, isn't even smirking. And perhaps appropriately so, since *Half-Life 2*'s episodic packets play relatively stingy with anything in the way of real plot developments (better to veil what little is there until later than blow the lid now). We do know this, though: *Episode Two* introduces one new weapon (the so-called Strider Buster), a single new foe (the tiny tripod Hunter pictured here), and one set of wheels (a self-propelled battering ram). Speyrer, however, is happy to talk around the episode's hot-button topics.... / **Shawn Elliott**

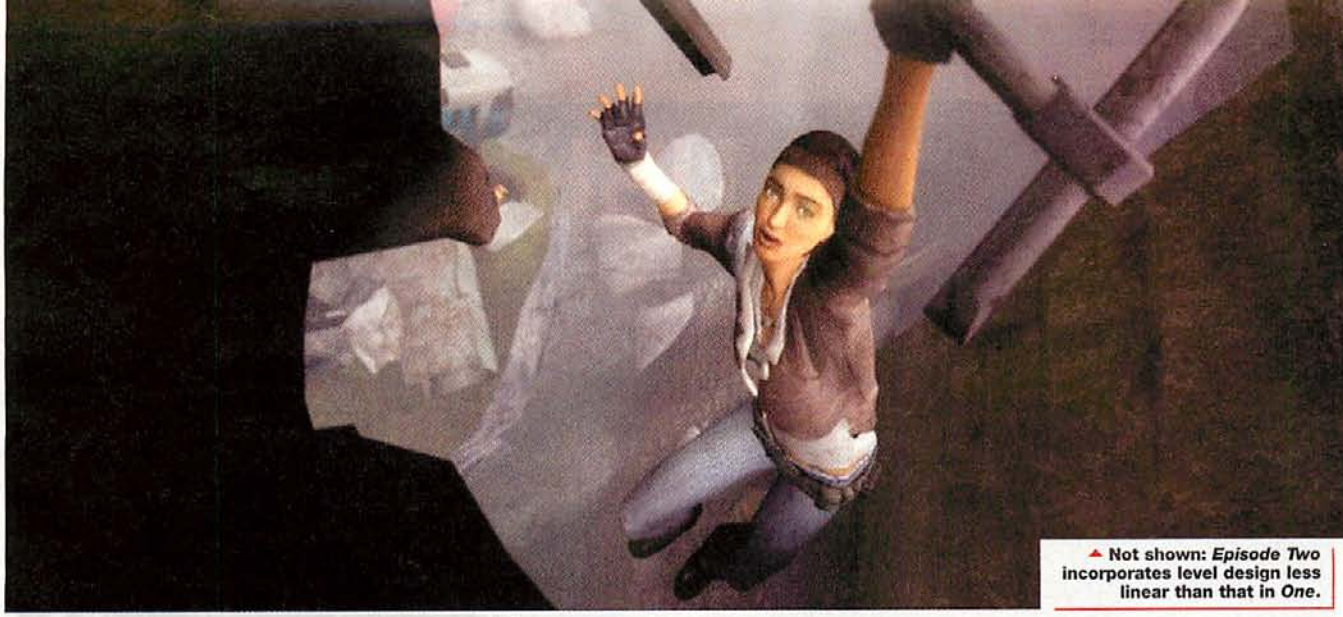
CGW: Any design elements introduced in *Episode One* that you intend to elaborate on in the second episode?
David Speyrer: We think of the episodes as adding tools to our game-design toolbox, so each episode draws from an ever-larger set of gameplay tools and mechanics. It's cool to realize that so many of the elements that we take for granted today, like the gravity gun or our companion A.I., were risky R&D projects during the development of *Half-Life 2* or *Episode One*. Continuing at that rate as we release more episodes is pretty exciting for us as designers, and for our customers. We'll bring many elements from *Episode One* forward into *Episode Two*, but we expect to use dynamic scripted sequences extensively. They allow close interaction between NPCs during combat—such as Alyx wrestling with zombies in *Episode One*—and because they happen spontaneously, every player will see different interactions at different moments in the game. We see lots of possibilities for this with respect to Hunters and citizens, for example.

CGW: Granted, you're still working this out, but what would you say an episodic game needs to do in order to ensure the attractiveness of subsequent installments? Making us care for a character and then setting us up for her seemingly impending death seems like a start....
DS: The main thing we want to do is move the *Half-Life* story forward meaningfully. We want our customers to realize that these episodes are the continuation of *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2* rather than optional detours from the main story line. Character and story are fundamental to the franchise, and we intend to keep pushing on those in every episode. Of course, we'll always keep the gameplay fresh and fun by introducing new NPCs, settings, and game mechanics.

CGW: In a previous interview with *CGW*, Valve managing director Gabe Newell explained that "in *Episode Two*, there are areas and vehicles that we saw potential in and wanted to push forward." Any chance we'll commandeer a Hunter, à la *Battlestar Galactica*'s Cylon Raider?
DS: Sounds cool—I'll have to watch that episode.

CGW: *Episode One* continues to establish Alyx as a character, and yet, the more life we see there, the less alive Gordon seems—an autistic weapon whose only actions, as Dr. Breen argues, are destructive. Perhaps part of that stems from the decision to avoid putting words in the player's mouth or implement a clumsy "give hug" key—does this sort of assessment concern you going ahead?
DS: Having the player be mute is definitely a design constraint that we struggle with at times, but the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. We worked hard to immerse players in our universe, and hearing Gordon speak would just remind players that they're playing a game. Despite the design difficulties, we still think that Gordon needs to be an empty vessel for the player's personality and emotions.

CGW: When we last talked, you dismissed the desire to learn about new weapons and levels as somewhat pedestrian, at least next to meatier matters like motivation. And yet, from the gravity gun to ant lions, headcrabs to snarks, *Half-Life*'s weapons locker and monster menagerie have helped make the series what it is. Wasn't *Episode One* a little light on both?



▲ **Not shown: *Episode Two* incorporates level design less linear than that in *One*.**

EPISODE TWO



DS: The gravity gun in *HL2* redefined for us the notion of "weapon" in the franchise. So we think that things like flares and saw blades are as important, if not more important, than traditional FPS weapons.

CGW: Valve intensively tracks and iterates in response to tester feedback. We can imagine a designer groaning at a player's seeming naiveté in the face of a challenge and cynically deciding to simply mark out a path or puzzle with a flashing icon—in the way certain other mass-market titles have—instead of continuing to tweak less obvious cues. How integral to the success of your games has this philosophy proven?

DS: I can't imagine shipping a game without putting it through our playtesting process. So many of our scenarios, especially our puzzles, went through many rounds of catastrophic failure in playtests. In many cases, there was no way to foresee those failures, much less imagine possible solutions. Because we refine incrementally, we always try the most subtle solution that we think will work and test that before resorting to more heavy-handed solutions. So, yes, I'd say the process is very integral to our games' success.

"GORDON NEEDS TO BE AN EMPTY VESSEL FOR THE PLAYER'S PERSONALITY AND EMOTIONS."

—DAVID SPEYRER, PROJECT LEAD

PLUSH EDITION



▲ Diaphragm moving freely, Michael Fuller's *Half-Life 2* ant lion attempts the full-lotus meditation posture. Cosmic mudra!

MEET MICHAEL FULLER'S COTTON-stuffed menagerie, teddy bugbears stitched in felt. Polygon for cloth panel, they're snarks, headcrabs, and ant lions; *Half-Life*'s organo-grenades, head-humpers, and hive-minded man-eaters, only cutesier.

Fuller found the idea on Steam's forums in '04. Talk of a stuffed headcrab in a defunct thread inspired him to pattern his own, pulling geometry data from *Half-Life* with package-extraction application GCFScape. He then simplified construction and created seams in a second application (Blender), and added finishing touches in Adobe Illustrator. "At that point," he says, "I laid out all pieces on sheets of paper and released an Acrobat file of the work on my website" (3d2toy.com, where a growing community of craftspeople share and compare thread-and-needle undertakings). With practice, Fuller's gotten faster and says he can now see a project from design-drafting start to fabric-sewing finish in as few as six hours..."If I'm dedicated."

So far, Fuller's sold four on eBay (20 bucks to cover material costs and another $10 for labor, which averages out to a beggarly $1.50 an hour). However, having completed everything from chumtoads to a limp-noodle crowbar, he's just about tapped Valve's universe and says he'll soon "have to start work on vehicles and miscellaneous items" or turn to other franchises for inspiration.



TEDDY BUGBEARS

PAPER EDITION



SURGEON-STEADY WITH A SCALPEL or an X-Acto, Bhautik Joshi's medium of choice is card stock, not cloth. "The idea," he says, "evolved from part of my Ph.D. work on surgical simulation. I was extracting volumetric, deformable meshes from 3D medical imaging data, and texturing the surfaces." The unproductive result: pixel-perfect sculptures of *Quake*'s pointy shambler, Joshi's all-time fave game character, and a GDF space marine to match. Says Joshi: "I wanted to preserve the old-school charm and chunky textures of the original *Quake*. Plus, I figured that someone else out there would want a shambler as a monitor ornament, too, so I share the models online at cow.mooh.org/paper."

Next up: more pulp bogeymen, but only after Joshi's completed other more pressing paperwork. "I'm sitting on a big pile of models, extracted and ready to unfold, but I have to wait until I hand in my Ph.D. thesis to finish them. I plan to tackle a few of the more popular *Quake* models first—perhaps the fiend and hell knight—and now that I've worked out a way of doing it, some *Half-Life* models, too...Gordon Freeman, scientists, snarks, headcrabs, even a life-sized crowbar." We're crossing our fingers for *Quake Arena* intergalactic biker BBW Lucy. / Shawn Elliott



▲ "No! No, mom, these aren't toys! Now get out of my Slipgate-maintenance cubby."



▲ All templates are available at cow.mooh.org/paper.

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CHEATING DEATH

Just Cause: Not your everyday *GTA* knockoff

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Avalanche Studios** GENRE: **Action-adventure** RELEASE DATE: **September 2006**

PREVIEW

ANYTIME SOMEONE COMPARES A game to *Grand Theft Auto*, it conjures up images of clunky, half-assed third-person action games that go for the quick and desperate buck by catering to the lowest common denominator (developers, apparently, maintain a keen awareness that the weekend stoner crowd doesn't devote too many brain cycles to selective shopping while browsing the shelves at the local EB). But indulge us a moment as we make this very same comparison about *Just Cause*—a game that, unlike the *Total Overdoses* and *Driver 3*s (pardon us, "*DRIV3Rs*") of the world, looks like it *just might* provide substantial entertainment value in lieu of mindless, derivative drivel.

Developer Avalanche Studios spent the last three years creating and polishing this game (allegedly due this fall), which puts you into the shoes of Rico Rodriguez, a Latin superspy who specializes in counterrevolution. His latest assignment takes him to the spacious tropical island of San Esperito, the backdrop for *Just Cause*. Think of Rico in a James-Bond-as-portrayed-by-Antonio-Banderas light—a man who makes the impossible look anything but. "You can do pretty much do anything you want," says Avalanche creative director Christofer Sundberg, speaking about the game's vehicle- and environment-based feats. "Skydive from a plane or helicopter, BASE jump from a cliff or tower, paraglide over the beautiful oceans or the cities, jump between cars and hijack them...or between aircraft, kicking out the pilot midair."

EVEL KNIEVEL

These sorts of stunts form the backbone of *Just Cause*'s action, effectively separating it from everyday *GTA*-inspired hack jobs. Rico's death-defying exploits provide a tangible sense of gratification and tense excitement, especially since it ostensibly takes but mere moments to grasp all but the most complex. "Some stunts require certain skills to perform," Sundberg points out, "like jumping between cars is something you'll have to practice. [But] it pays off, as some cars are more difficult than others to [commandeer]."

Also worth noting: the game's world ("very varied and complex, with an area of 1,024 square kilometers," says Sundberg), which exhibits the expected abundance of free-roaming action-adventure trappings—missions to complete, places to explore, and side quests to discover. Even with a few obvious..."tributes"...to *GTA* in place (*San Andreas* déjà vu: "It makes no difference if you destroy a coca field by using a box of matches or a jumbo jet to burn it," Sundberg explains), our gut says *Just Cause* isn't just another prototypical cash-in. One more eye toward quality: Expect lots the PC version to match its Xbox 360 counterpart for visual oomph. *Just Cause* remains an inexplicably low-key game in the enthusiast press and otherwise—but if you ask us, it stands a fair chance of surpassing the myriad copycats its genre cultivates. And for that, we salute it./**Ryan Scott**

>> THINK OF RICO IN A JAMES-BOND-AS-PORTRAYED-BY-ANTONIO-BANDERAS LIGHT—A MAN WHO MAKES THE IMPOSSIBLE LOOK ANYTHING BUT.



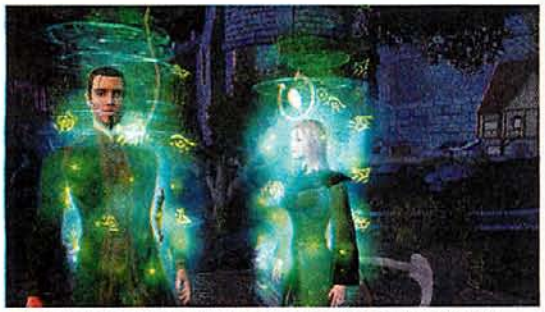
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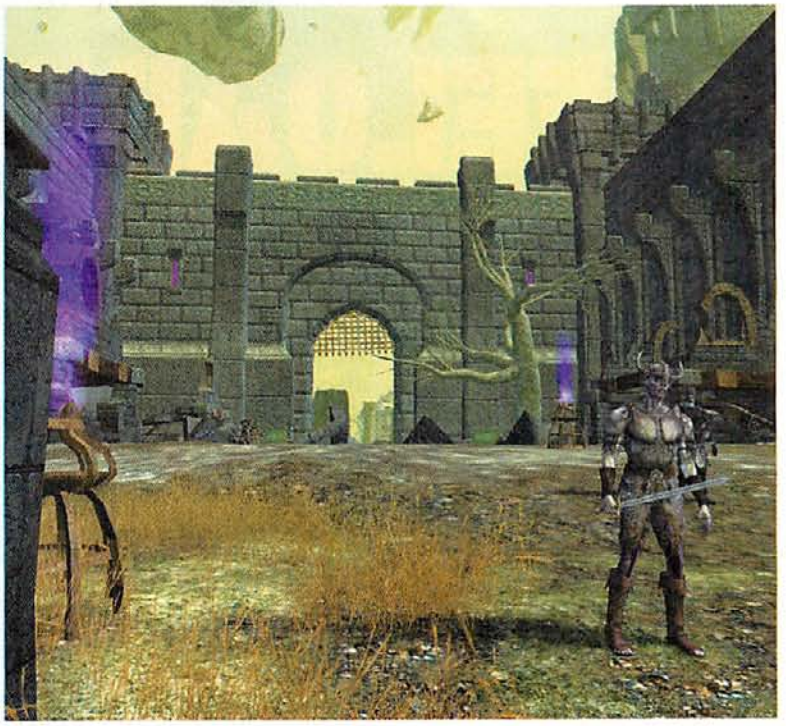
▲ **Gravity? Here's what Rico Rodriguez thinks about your precious "gravity."**



Diplomacy lets you deal in factions and lore, advancing your character in ways that don't involve combat.



"I think the biggest thing we've learned from *WOW*," says McQuaid, "is that players rightfully expect a high degree of polish—in terms of gameplay, UI, or anything else, for that matter."



Hardcore and proud of it: *Vanguard* wants to lure folks away from *WOW* with increased challenge, meaningful player housing, and the intriguing field of diplomacy.

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

Life after 60?

PUBLISHER: **Sony Online Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Sigil Games** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **Winter 2006**

PREVIEW

THE STATS AT MMOGCHART.COM tell us that over 50 percent of all MMO players hang out in *World of WarCraft*—makes you wonder what kind of masochist would ever dream of making another one of these massively risky monsters. But Brad McQuaid, former *EverQuest* mastermind and current CEO of Sigil Games, developer of the upcoming unapologetically harder-core, high-fantasy *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*, thinks his game offers something that the Horde ranks don't: "Freedom," for one thing. "The ability to customize characters to a degree yet unseen in MMOs. *Vanguard* is more challenging, too—though challenge does not mean tedium."

So what to make of the fact that the corpse runs—*EverQuest*'s primary tedious fun-killer—are still a stubborn part of *Vanguard*'s design? "If you die in the depths of a dungeon, the penalty should be higher than if you die on a hill just outside of a friendly village," explains McQuaid. "But when you die in *Vanguard*, an entry in your travel journal leads back to your corpse. Right around level 10, the level where you'll first need to do a corpse run, you'll also have your first mount." In *Vanguard*, these range from the usual horses to ships to flying mythical creatures, all of which pull double-duty as pack mules. McQuaid also expects players to carry multiple "situational" sets of gear with their mounts (which stay with you even after death). "We've pretty much eliminated the 'naked' corpse run that turns so many people off—and rightfully so." OK, you've got our attention—go on.

Vanguard also offers a reason to get excited about player housing: mobility. "Many players will want to keep their houses near areas designed for their level range, and as they level up, they'll be able to move—making their previous plot of land available again for new, up-and-coming players," McQuaid says. "Because these houses can be placed near adventure or harvesting areas that are around the same level range as [players] are, we're not talking about long travel times back to your base of operations."

But *Vanguard*'s loftiest desire is to bring the disparate spheres of character development—in this world, adventuring, crafting, and the experimental field of diplomacy—into harmonious alignment. "A high-level, multisphere encounter might be one where you need diplomats to convince the guardians of a dragon's lair to permit you entrance," says McQuaid. "You enter that lair in search of extremely rare dragon eggs—that goal being different from your original stated intent—that might be protected by dragons, in which case you'll need a high adventuring level to handle the encounter. Then you need to employ high-level harvesting skills to obtain the eggs.... You then sell the eggs or use your own crafting skills, perhaps leading to the production of a very rare and powerful potion." But potent enough to break the almighty grip of *WOW*? / **Sean Molloy**

"WE'VE PRETTY MUCH ELIMINATED THE 'NAKED' CORPSE RUN THAT TURNS SO MANY PEOPLE OFF—AND RIGHTLY SO." –BRAD MCQUAID, CEO, SIGIL GAMES

COLUMN

FREELOADER

Scoring free games without that icky "pirate" aftertaste



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL JENNINGS

HOW'S IT GOING, MAN? MY JACKASS ROOMMATE IS OUT OF TOWN, SO C'MON IN—GRAB a seat. Sorry, let me get some of these pizza boxes outta the way. Say, you hungry? I think I got some extra slices...over here...no. Hey, do you mind checking right behind you? I think there might be a slice or two under the cushion. No, not that one. There ya go—that's it. Man, isn't summer vacation sweet? For a change, nobody's here to complain about how big a slob I am. All I need to sweat is where my next gaming fix will come from. OK, maybe that and finding where I left the remote. But before solving that great mystery of life, I should focus on a more important task: finding some cool free games to keep me out of direct sunlight for a couple more hours. /The Freeloader

ON FILEFRONT

In an uncharacteristic act of exerting effort, the Freeloader put all of the games mentioned in this month's column up online, just for you. Check out cgw.filefront.com.



THE GAME: **Penumbra**
FILE UNDER: **Scary good**
URL: **penumbragame.com**

Penumbra is this incredibly cool-looking survival-horror game. Well, "horror adventure." Whatever, man. Point is, at some time during the demo, I guarantee you'll double-check behind you to make sure nothing's creeping round the bend.

The built-from-scratch graphics engine matches just about anything you'll see on store shelves right now, and the game won't cost you a lousy penny. That alone earns it my coveted Cheapo's Choice award. The detailed, freakish creatures rate high on the creep-o-meter—reminds me of that feeling I get whenever Paris Hilton tries to think. In fact, I'd bet that even the zombified flying turd monsters in this game have more neurons firing than she does—they're constantly on the hunt for you. Barricade a door, and they'll knock it right open. Top that, Hilton.

Objects operate just as you'd expect. You have to pull out drawers to look inside, and what game is complete without some box-stacking physics puzzles to reach other areas? Hey, not complaining here. Just sayin', is all.



THE GAME: **Base Invaders**
FILE UNDER: **Dungeon Keeper + Whack-a-Mole**
URL: **cgw.filefront.com**

The only thing better than watching an army of cute, cuddly critters go at it is hearing their wee bodies squish like overripe tomatoes. *Base Invaders*' concept is simple: Protect your base tower at all costs from armies of miniraiders. Build walls, lay down traps, or just use your virtual hand to grab and chuck enemies across the battlefield. It may sound like a cakewalk, but it's not—not by a long shot. Waves of invaders swarm the neighborhood, not content to leave until the place is a wreck. Kinda like when the family's in town. Then, when you finally beat them all back and take a deep breath, you get maybe a whole minute to recover, set up more defenses, and get ready for the next attack.

The sound is the other half of the fun here. Crank up the speakers to hear the goofy effects and music—I guarantee you'll get strange looks from anyone within earshot. Seriously, the neighbors started peering through my windows making weird faces. This game is so out there that I can't help but love it.



THE GAME: **Space Cowboy Online**
FILE UNDER: **MMO shooter *innnnn spaaaaace!***
URL: **sco.gpotato.com**

"Some call me the gangster of love. Some people call me Mau-rice—woo-hoo!—'cause I speak of the pompatus of loooove." OK, I seriously doubt someone intentionally named a game after some Steve Miller Band lyric. But it sure would be awesome if they did.

MMO publisher GPotato (GPotato? WTF does that mean?) takes a risk here by making its shooting game available for free—with a few strings attached. *Space Cowboy Online* technically follows the letter of MMO law: You get different classes (well, they call 'em "gears") of ships that you directly control. Go on solo missions, dogfight other players, and, as you level up and upgrade your intergalactic rig, form 40-player brigades for some seriously hairy space combat.

Remember how I mentioned that there were a few strings attached? Well, technically, you can get in free. However, if you want to get to the good content and higher levels, you need to pony up some cash. The extra stuff may be good—I'm just too cheap to find out.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY AUGUST 2006



THE GOOD
HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE

Proof that episodic content can mean more than just "expansion pack"? Maybe. But that's beside the point. Even more so than *Half-Life 2* proper, *Episode One* offers three-dimensional characters (and we're not just talking about graphics), great writing, and intelligently wrought environmental puzzles. And the commentary mode gives new meaning to the word replayability.



THE BAD
HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE TWO

The perils of episodic content reveal themselves as we now have to wait *five months* to find out what happens to Gordon and friends. There's a 0.6-percent chance the average American male will be dead within that time frame. But the teaser trailer at the end of *Episode One* (spoilers ahoy) certainly did its job: visions of new locations and a maybe-dead Alyx. Oh well, it's better than waiting five *years*.



THE UGLY
BATTLEFIELD 2 V1.3 PATCH

The *Battlefield 2* v1.3 patch EA released in June broke the browser and introduced crash-to-desktop problems across the board—no PC is safe. The bright side: DICE has a fix ready. Back to the dark side: They're not releasing it until the next regularly scheduled patch, which won't be for a while. DICE is working on a new map to go along with it, and they plan on putting the patch through a public beta period prior to release.

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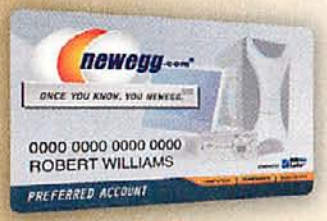
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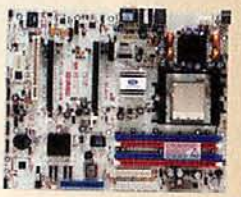
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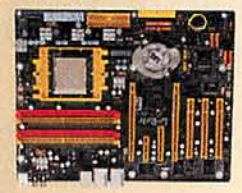
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THE GREAT DIVIDE

IF YOU NEED PROOF THAT THE GULF BETWEEN PC AND CONSOLE gamers is real, then Live Anywhere—Microsoft's online-gaming olive branch allowing Windows and Xbox Live players to face off in the same games—is it. When Microsoft launched the Xbox console in 2001, we all harbored a secret fear that the company would let PC games wither and die in its pursuit of console ascendancy—but that didn't happen. Instead, it embraced both as siblings with different audiences and different assets.

"It's really about user preference," says Peter Moore, corporate vice president of Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment division. "In the past, Windows gamers have been accustomed to playing games with a keyboard and mouse, and many gamers prefer this."

But the distinction goes beyond interface. Mitch Gitelman, studio manager of FASA (currently at work on cross-platform Xbox 360/Windows shooter *Shadowrun*), says that PCs offer an intimacy and intensity that consoles don't—the difference between what he calls a "two-foot experience" and a "10-foot experience": "A two-foot experience is right in your face, so the visuals and audio can be more subtle. A 10-foot experience requires bigger and bolder sound and visuals to get you excited from that distance. It's kind of like the difference between watching a movie on a 30-foot screen and watching a play in a theater. On a big screen, the actor need only narrow his eyes to be menacing. On a stage, he might need to move into another character's personal space."

But Louis Castle, vice president of EA Los Angeles and executive producer of *Battle for Middle-Earth II*, is currently in the unusual position of bringing an RTS already available on the PC to the Xbox 360; he feels that intimacy is a function of genre and interface as much as platform. Of RTS games, he says: "The mouse and keyboard are inherently selection devices that imply a level of abstraction. The [360] controller is a direct-input device that implies a more intimate connection to the actions you're controlling." But the same can't be said of a game like *Half-Life 2*, where a player's mouse movements and Gordon Freeman's onscreen motion are as cozy as can be.

Still other dynamics define the divide: "A PC player is usually savvier in terms of hardware and system tweaking," says Todd Howard, executive producer at Bethesda Softworks, whose once PC-only *Elder Scrolls* RPG series is now one of the Xbox 360's flagships. "A console player just expects it to work perfectly."

"The price of full [PC and console] systems affects the market," adds Diarmid Clarke, project director of the upcoming PC version of BioWare's *Jade Empire*. "I'd wager that your 'average' PC owner is less likely to be into anime than an Xbox or PlayStation 2 owner is." Indeed, the high cost of entry—and upkeep—is constantly touted as one of the barriers to PC gaming. But just how big a barrier is it?

"Windows lets users do much more than just play videogames...[it also allows] word processing, web browsing, and e-mail," says Peter Moore. "So hundreds of millions of people out there already have a very viable gaming machine right on their desk." And with escalating console prices (the high-end PlayStation 3 will cost $599), that "work PC" suddenly grows longer legs as a gaming device. What's more, console licensing fees mean that Xbox 360 versions of games often cost $10 to $20 more than their PC counterparts. *Tomb Raider: Legend*, for example, sells for $59.99 on the Xbox 360 and $39.99 on the PC—and, as most gamers tend to buy a couple games every month, it doesn't take long for a console's TCO (total cost of ownership) to keep pace with a PC.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

In the world of game development, which comes first: the console or the PC?

In 2001, Bethesda revealed it would be bringing the third installment of its *Elder Scrolls* series to the Xbox at the same time as the PC—a decision that startled fans familiar with the game's first-person, nonlinear role-playing (and decidedly "PC") nature. Since then, Bethesda's been fighting the notion that it—and other developers—tend to "dumb down" games for the allegedly simpleminded console set. Take the lock-picking and persuasion minigames in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, for example,

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEJANDRO CHAVETTA

A SEPARA

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em? After years of discor

which many critics felt screamed "console concession." Howard dismisses that assessment.

"They came from the desire to have each skill have some gameplay," he explains. "*Elder Scrolls* has a Security skill and a Speechcraft skill. In *Morrowind*, you didn't get to actually *do* anything with them. So it was our goal to make those skills more interactive, as opposed to just clicking 'unlock' and waiting for a random dice roll. That was the whole thought process, to somehow create interactive 'dice rolls.'" In other words, not just to provide "thumb candy" for fidgety console gamers.

And what of *Oblivion*'s interface, which prompted modders to create their own PC-friendly version in the form of BTmod, which PC players downloaded in droves? "I think people are reacting to the [large] font size, not the interface mechanics themselves," says Howard. "We talked about having a small-font option, as it's not hard to do with the XML-driven menu system, but we didn't have a nice way of switching between large-font XMLs and small-font XMLs; it was one or the other. So we went with the larger font on the PC, hoping that would work for the majority of users. But I think BTmod is great, and I'm glad someone did it."

Howard even counters the assumption that PC players dig first-person while console kids prefer third-person views. "Regardless of platform, people play *Oblivion* mostly in first-person. We've actually seen more people try third-person on the PC—people who have been playing a lot of *World of WarCraft*."

In the end, Bethesda found that it didn't have to dumb down its games; console gamers were ready to rise up to the developer's intent. "For the games we create, I've found that PC and console players both expect the same things," says Howard. But he acknowledges that the move to consoles did have *some* impact on gameplay. "We learned a lot about making things easier on a first-time user by working on a console—I guess because it just forces us to think differently. Those kinds of things, like nice tutorials, easy controls, limiting button usage...benefited both versions."

By contrast, Mathieu Girard, producer of Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, *does* find differences worth accounting for—though these differences creep up from an older divide. "A large and influential community emerged with the first episode of *Ghost Recon* after its release five years ago," says Girard. "They appeared to be very demanding, but also very involved.... From the beginning, this community has been very sensitive to the specific aspects of the game—such as the advanced tactical orientation—and, as a result, they have been pushing the game over the years.... [So] *GRAW* for the PC has been specifically developed for the PC community."

When crafting *GRAW* for the 360, Ubisoft recognized that the game would likely be reaching a new audience, so accessibility was essential. But when designing the PC version, Girard felt they had to trust their roots. "Immersion was key," says Girard—it's the two-foot-versus-10-foot difference. "That's why we chose the first-person representation rather the third-person view [of the Xbox 360 version]. Also, we did not focus on direct action in the PC version as we did on consoles, but more on strategy and tactics. We remade all the art assets; the game engine, A.I., and behaviors are all different; and maps are easily twice the size on the PC." As for the PC version's lack of a save-anywhere option in favor of "console-style" checkpoints: "To reinforce the tactical aspect of the game," says Girard. "We did not want gamers to just carelessly run out like in some other FPS."

WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY

Where *Oblivion* and *GRAW* seem to stand as examples of cross-platform done right, PC gamers are more than familiar with ports gone wrong—translations of otherwise well-designed console titles such as *King Kong* or *The Godfather* that don't take advantage of current PC tech and end up looking shoddy and stale.

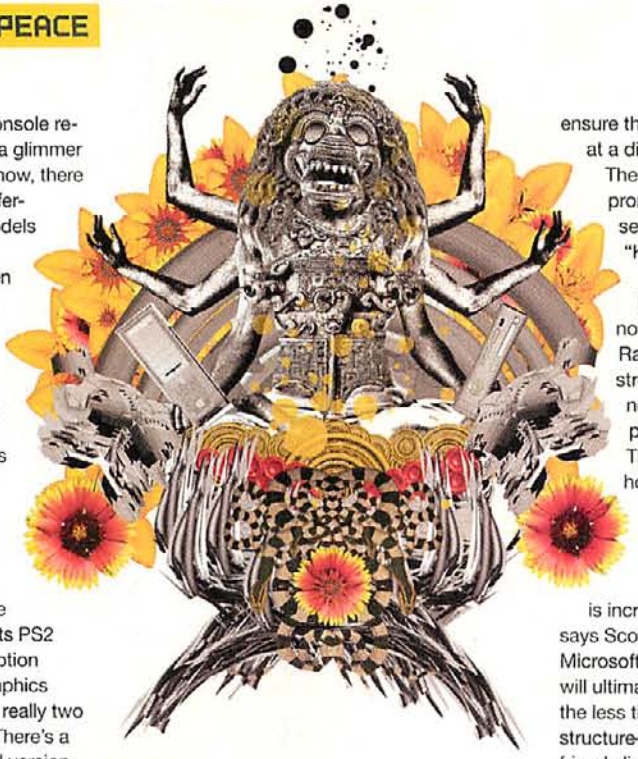
Matthew Guzenda, senior producer of Crystal Dynamics' *Tomb Raider: Legend*, says that money is the motive, naturally: "Most PC versions of [PS2 or Xbox] titles were just high-res-texture versions of the console versions. If you wanted to do normal maps or dynamic lighting, you pretty much had to 're-art' the game, which adds pretty significant cost to development—and most companies don't deem this worth the additional cost."



TE PEACE

PC and console games unite in an uneasy alliance.

PS3 = PC?
Sony president Ken Kutaragi recently said the PlayStation 3 is a computer, not a console.



But the next-gen-console regime change offers a glimmer of hope. "Up until now, there has been a big difference in the lighting models between PC and console titles. PCs, for some time, have been able to handle per-pixel lighting models, but because the PS2 can't handle per-pixel lighting, most console titles are vertex lit—no normal maps, dynamic lights, and other such stuff you generally see in PC-only games.... The Xbox 360—and soon, the PS3—changes that. You can use similar art techniques between [next-gen consoles] and high-end PC graphics cards."

Guzenda's own game, *Tomb Raider: Legend*, shipped simultaneously for the PS2, Xbox, PC, and Xbox 360. And while the PC version's "standard" mode reflects PS2 and Xbox tech, the Next-Gen Content option makes much better use of your $400 graphics card. "The PC version of *Tomb Raider* is really two versions of the game," says Guzenda. "There's a complete set of textures for the standard version, which are high-res versions of the Xbox and PS2 textures. Then there's another full set of textures and lighting data for the Next-Gen Content version based off the work that we did for the 360 and PC versions."

Translation: New consoles can actually be good for PC gaming—at least when it comes to ports. "There are no longer any differences in the production environments of PC and console games," says Kijong Kang, producer of Webzen's upcoming cross-platform *Huxley*. "Console games can be made by applying the know-how used to make PC games, with little effort."

> "I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING LONG-TERM THAT A PC WILL BE ABLE TO DO THAT A CONSOLE WON'T."
> —MATTHEW GUZENDA, SENIOR PRODUCER, CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

ensure that keyboard-and-mouse players are not at a disadvantage."

The producers of *Huxley*, an MMOFPS promoting cross-platform play, have pegged segregation as the only fair approach: "Keyboard and mouse are controllers optimized for FPS games," says Webzen's Kang, "and the Xbox 360 control pad is no match for the strengths of the mouse. Rather than tone down [each platform's] strengths to compensate for different weaknesses, we decided not to let 360 and PC players play on the same battlegrounds. The players on the two platforms will, however, be able to enjoy certain content together...related to communications in which minute differences in controls do not affect fun."

"The early feedback [on Live Anywhere] is incredibly encouraging and superpositive," says Scott Henson, product unit manager of Microsoft's Game Technology Group, "but gamers will ultimately decide if we're crazy or not...and the less time developers have to invest in infrastructure—authentication, billing, matchmaking, friends lists, messaging, and so on—the more they can focus on making a great game."

But Live Anywhere isn't without its hazards. One possible side effect: more PC games being built with the limitations of an inevitably inferior console in mind. "A console is static," says Bethesda's Howard. "The PC is an ever-evolving, highly customizable machine. It's fluid. This allows a game coming out next week to use new hardware, or some new way of connecting to people, that a console cannot do." Even now, the Xbox 360 "has larger restrictions in memory compared to the PC," says Kang, "so such restraints must be taken into account in production."

THE LIVE EFFECT

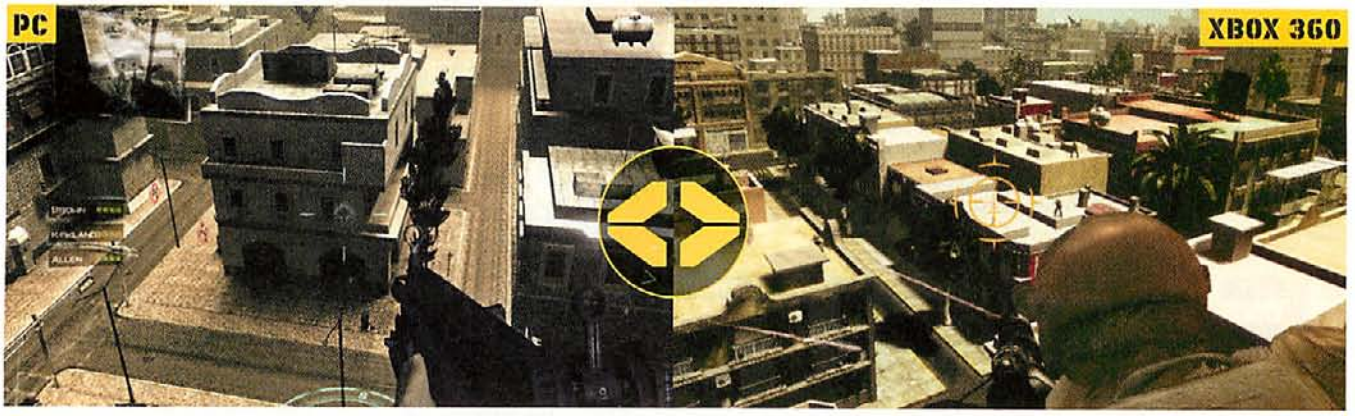
The cross-platform connectivity offered by Live Anywhere, Microsoft's upcoming service that allows 360 and Windows players to play with one another, complicates matters—the most immediate conundrum being how to deal with the platforms' fundamentally different control schemes. The folks at FASA, makers of Live Anywhere's shooter "spokesgame" *Shadowrun*, don't think the controls have irreconcilable differences: "The menus are the same, and the HUD is the same," says FASA studio manager Mitch Gitelman. "Only the input devices are different." Early versions of *Shadowrun* compensated for the PC's keyboard-and-mouse advantage by being more forgiving toward 360 players in aiming, but the developers are still chasing the perfect solution. "One advantage that Xbox 360 gamers have is that their controllers rumble, which tells them when they're magically healing or getting shot. A mouse doesn't rumble, so [our designers] have to find ways to

THE GREAT CONJUNCTION

Alarmist conspiracy theories aside (is Live Anywhere just a Trojan horse designed to get us "used to" the console way before Microsoft pulls the rug out from beneath Windows gaming?), convergence seems to be the inevitable conclusion. "I believe that one day, there will be no real difference," says Henson. "You'll be able to play anything you want on one device and choose the depth of experience and control with a glorious lack of complication."

"I'm sure I will offend some gameplay purists," says Guzenda. "But I can't really think of anything long-term that a PC will be able to do that a console won't, or vice versa. Short-term, the PC is still going to be the platform of choice for MMOs and RTS games because of the keyboard...[but] I don't think we're very far from the point where every PC user will have a gamepad and every console player will have a keyboard."

Some wars bear no winners—just uneasy truces. / **Sean Molloy**



The PC version of *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* opts for a first-person perspective; the Xbox 360 version uses a third-person view.

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DARK MESSIAH OF

Holy fireballs! First look at the upcoming fantasy shooter's wild multiplayer mayhem

DARK MESSIAH, ARKANE STUDIOS' IN-YOUR-OWN-EYES TAKE ON *Might and Magic*, is more than the real-time strategy series writ single-player FPS; its LAN/online modes are more than just fantasyland maps loosely repurposed for the multiplayer mob. "What we don't want to be," says producer Romain de Waubert de Genlis, "is a poorly executed brilliant idea." Instead, the onetime *Battlefield 1942* lead designer wants his work here to last in the long term, as his previous game has. His and Arkane's challenge: to innovate beyond the dying bastion of by-the-numbers deathmatching while integrating gameplay form-fit to the genre with a magic-making campaign mode and swords-and-sorcery combat. / **Shawn Elliott**

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft**
DEVELOPER: **Arkane Studios**
GENRE: **Action**
RELEASE DATE: **September 2006**





LEVELING ON THE PLAYING FIELD

Human or undead, characters of *Messiah*'s two factions come in five more-or-less self-explanatory flavors—warrior, assassin, archer, mage, and priest—and each can scale his or her own branching skill tree over the course of a crusade. According to de Waubert de Genlis, "Individual classes offer a dozen or so skills, and some are upgradeable. Take an assassin, for example: Early on, he's able to become invisible and backstab enemies; later, he learns to disguise himself, set traps, move silently, poison victims, and feign death. It's a natural evolution. Then, you must keep in mind that we conceive skills and classes with a classic rock-paper-scissors approach, so that no matter how strong you are in your specialty, you're always stronger when working with your team. Some one ability or class can always overcome or outsmart the other."

MIGHT AND MAGIC



CAPELESS CRUSADING

Arkane would rather *Messiah*'s multiplayer content create new conventions unique to its swords-spells-and-shadows slant than simply appropriate aspects of existing sci-fi and military shooters. In other words, if arrows stand in for guns and healing spells serve as health packs (which they do), the game needs something more—or the difference is only skin deep. Says de Waubert de Genlis: "We face a few specific constraints that tie into the nature of the project. First off, melee combat is more prevalent in *Dark Messiah* than in any other shooter to date, and that means that we've had to imagine the system from the ground up and then adapt the game's balance accordingly." That constraint alone creates several consequences. How, for instance, would Arkane evenly match long-shooting archers against melee-only warriors? This is a challenge met by creating the Charge skill and supplying the latter class with more stamina to pursue fleeing players. Then, to mitigate these new advantages, Arkane introduced the priestess-based Slow spell that allows wand-wavers to hobble sprinting opponents.

To underscore *Messiah*'s Tolkien-rooted family tree, Arkane is looking not so much to shooters but to fantasy gaming's traditional stomping grounds: namely, level-based role-playing. Hence Crusade mode's five-chapter campaigns on as many maps. So where *Battlefield 1942*'s now-typical control-point system brands *Messiah*'s action, it's *World of WarCraft*'s PVP battlegrounds and honor system that inspire its structure. *Messiah*'s party members apply collected experience points to their characters' progress over the course of serial encounters, beefing up accuracy, stamina, and armor while learning to apply poisons, set traps, amplify spells, and more.

In addition, *Messiah*'s multiplayer uses conceptually evolving maps to suggest narrative without actually inserting story, so to speak. "We convey continuity between maps in two ways," says de Waubert de Genlis. "First, they dovetail visually. Stand at the far end of a human map where you're nearing undead territory, and you'll see the architecture and environment change. Plus, it's the outcome of the previous match that determines the next map that you play on, not the server's map cycle."



▲ Behold and tremble at the terrible might of the static cling spell.

CHARACTERS OF *MESSIAH*'S TWO FACTIONS COME IN FIVE FLAVORS—WARRIOR, ASSASSIN, ARCHER, MAGE, AND PRIEST.

FANTASY FRAG

Blocking is possible; parrying, too—*Dark Messiah*'s hand-to-hand combat options are comprehensive even as they diverge from those that define unplugged play. "The multiplayer melee system is similar in that it's played from first-person and it allows you to perform *most* of the moves from solo play, such as strong and chained slashes," says de Waubert de Genlis. "But, because players obviously act and react in ways A.I. won't—meaning that they move faster and are less inclined to remain in front of you—we had to adapt. So we introduced more options to the mix, connecting most of them to skills, specifically the warrior and assassin classes' aggressive charges."

Conan-cut warriors—*Messiah*'s most heavily armed and armored character class—lop heads when properly positioned and rely on a stamina-sapping rush to close the gap for their gruesome coups de grâce. Misjudge distances, however, and the warrior not only deals no damage, but also finds himself too fatigued to follow up with other life-taking offensives. Three solutions to countering the schlemiel: Backpedal, stutter-step aside, or lean on abracadabra to slow the louts' advance. Once the warrior's bull-rushing, he can't break off.

The assassins' blitz, on the other hand, autotriggers when silent-but-deadly sorts slip behind rattlebrained quarry. "They'll miss if the target is moving fast," says de Waubert de Genlis. "Otherwise, evasion is out of the question, and the rush might deal damage to multiple opponents." Solution: Stay mobile and survey your surroundings…especially when you're a mage or priest and must stand stock-still when casting certain spells. "In the end," de Waubert de Genlis argues, "it adds variety and verve while preserving the unique feeling of fighting in first-person." In order to deliver, we'll add, *Messiah* must give its dagger and bludgeon blows gravity. Thwacks—lethal or less-than—should sting in ways the gauzy knife strikes in existing multiplayer FPSes don't.

Ideally, differently classed allies work in concert—and are designed to do so. De Waubert de Genlis offers a trio of examples: "First: An undead assassin stalks some humans. A human priestess then spots the assassin, and with her special ability, 'marks' him for her team. The once-cloaked assassin is now clearly visible, and the human team receives a bonus for killing him. Now, say that a human archer fires an arrow that blurs the assassin's vision, allowing a human warrior to finish him off. The archer, priestess, and warrior will then share the multiplied experience points.

"Second: Say a warrior's manipulating a platform. Since the warrior's exposed and in need of protection, a mage might decide to cast a sphere to defend his ally against enemy spells. Unfortunately, an undead archer manages to kill the warrior. However, if a human priestess is nearby, she'll resurrect and heal the warrior.

"Final example: Enemy warriors attack three archers and a priestess. The priestess summons bramble bushes, which slow the attackers, allowing the archers to finish them off."



▲ *Dark Messiah*'s Girl Scouts get a little more aggressive about their cookie sales.

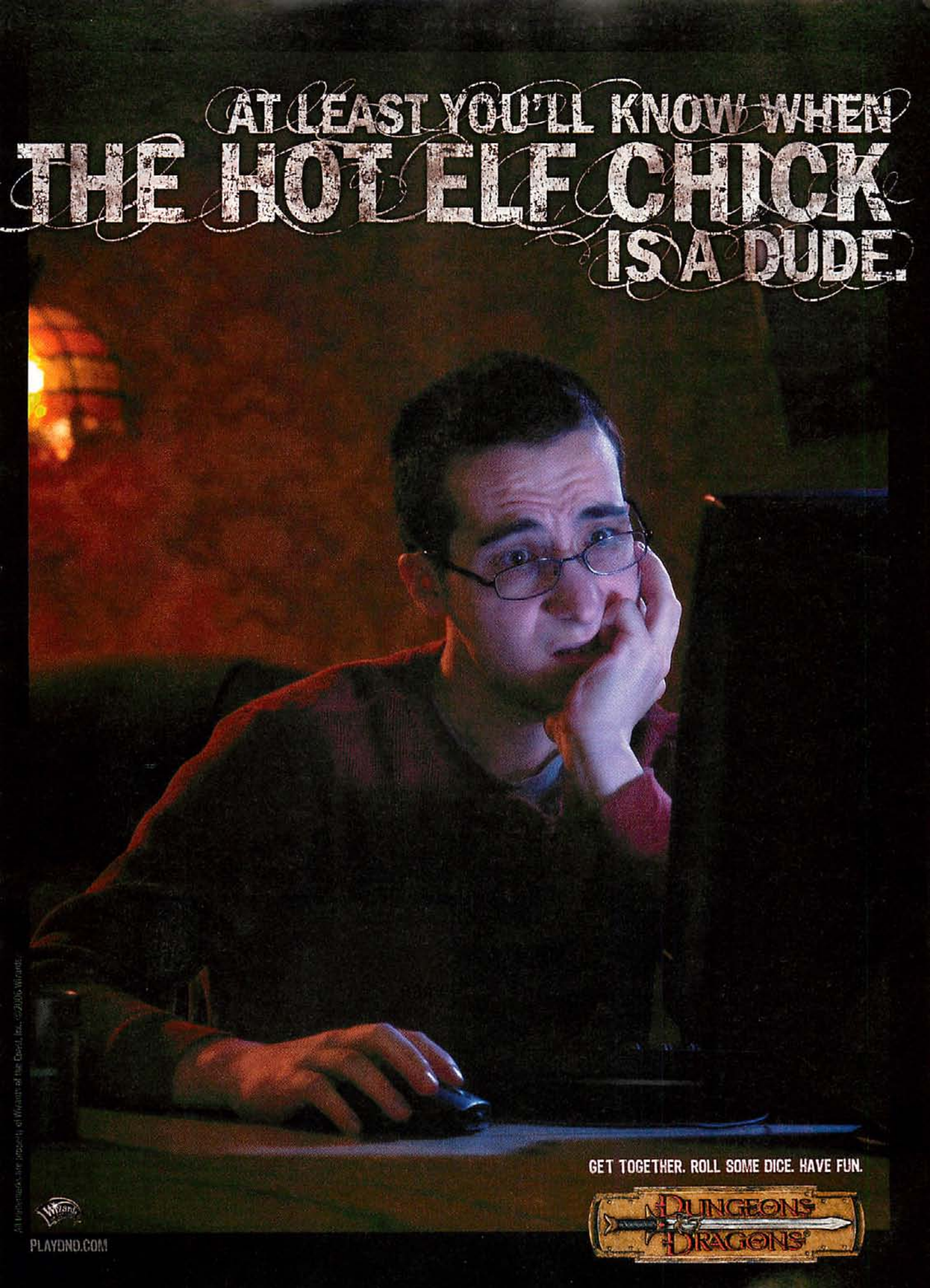


▲ In the medieval rental listings, this keep is considered "a cozy fixer-upper with minor orc issues."



▲ For the next season of *The Simple Life*, Paris Hilton tries her hand at black magic. Watch the hijinks!

» FRIENDS-LIST FUNCTIONALITY? "WE'RE CURRENTLY EVALUATING MULTIPLE FEATURES AND OPTIONS," SAYS DE WAUBERT DE GENLIS. "BUT WE PREFER TO NOT COMMENT PRIOR TO HAVING DEFINITIVE ANSWERS."


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GAMING GREATS

Retrospective: Lord Quest

FACTOID
Dale "Lord Quest" Koppenhaver cameod on the box art of Game Boy Advance racer *Karnaal Rally*.

Meet Dale Koppenhaver, sometimes known as Lord Quest, founding father of the adventure genre. The genius behind the successful *Journey Quest* series in the '80s and the *Tough Cop Adventure* trilogy in the '90s, Koppenhaver hasn't released a game in the eight years since his underwhelming *Expedition Banana and the Quest Salads* sold only 87 copies. / **Seanbaby**

INTERVIEW

CGW: Thank you for this rare interview. How did you get the name "Lord Quest"?
Dale Koppenhaver: Lord Quest was just the first nickname I gave myself that people actually called me.

CGW: Is that why you're crying?
DK: No! No. Sometimes I test out puzzle solutions in real life before I put them in a game. In my new piece, the player needs to protect his headband from being snatched off his head by vultures, so I was seeing if I could secure it to my forehead better with mayonnaise. A little bit of it is running into my eyes. That's all.

CGW: Sounds like a hard game, but we're sure our readers won't want spoilers. Tell us some about how you got started in the industry, Mr. Koppenhaver.
DK: Please, call me "Lord Quest."

CGW: Fine.
Lord Quest: Out of nursing school, my roommate, Ted, and I, Lord Quest, decided to take our love of reading and combine it with our love of typing. We created our first game: *Quest Adventure*. It was purely text, but players were so imaginative back then, we barely had to even write descriptions...which was good, because between the two of us, we only knew 18 adjectives. And four of them meant "lonely."

CGW: After that, you revolutionized the genre by adding graphics....
LQ: Well, I noticed that everywhere I looked, I saw things. Everywhere. So why not add that element to a game?

CGW: Which led to the *Journey Quest* series.
LQ: Right. And *Journey Quest*'s graphics took gameplay to a whole new level. Now, not only did players have to figure out what to do with the bucket, they had to figure out that it *was* a bucket.

CGW: That thing was a bucket?
LQ: As technology got better, we could make the quests even more challenging. For example, in *Journey Quest IV: Curse of the Missing Water Pipe Valve Quest*, time actually passed in the game. It actually changed from night to day. This added tremendous possibilities to puzzles. Even if the player figured out to make the key by throwing the kitten and the bar of soap into the ceiling fan, they might not know *when* to do it.

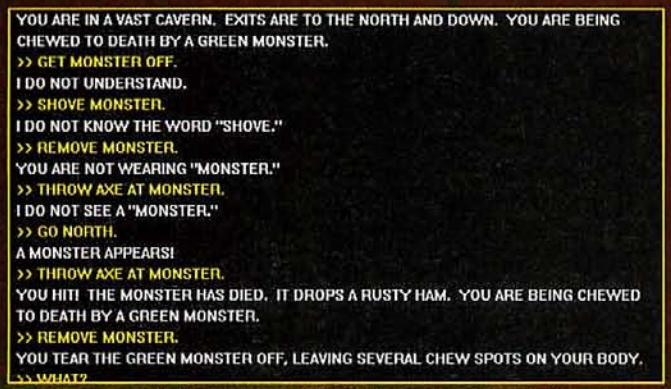
CGW: And still, there was the challenge of the player having to recognize the strange object outside the barn to be a ceiling fan.
LQ: Exactly! But we knew we were running out of things we could do with *doing things*, so we added humor. We were really proud of *Boner Balls Quest*, which was not only humorous, it was the first game for adults only. It incorporated mature situations previously unimagined in gaming. And its sequel, *Poop: The Game*, took it to an all-new level. "FART!" Hahaha, sorry, I was just thinking back to one of the puzzles where the game's main character, Poop: The Character, had to sneak past a security guard after a chili-eating contest. Hahaha!

CGW: You paved the way for many of today's developers. What can we look forward to in future Lord Quest projects?
LQ: Actually, I may take a break from PC gaming. With all these flashy movie tie-ins like *Timecop*, *American Gladiators*, and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*...it just seems that the questing market is dead.

CGW: Blame 1993's *Last Action Hero*?
LQ: That and, well, [gamers] just aren't as sophisticated as they used to be...not as smart. I know there are still some gamers out there eager to test their wits in a quest for...I mean, back then, you used your brain. You had to *think* to put the tuna cans under your armpits to trick Scentor into thinking you were a fish.

CGW: It was an act reserved for the intellectual elite.
LQ: Are you going to eat that?

CGW: That's a pencil. /



▲ Dale broke into the industry with his text-only hit *Quest Adventure*.



▲ Sayeth Lord Quest, "*Journey Quest* was one of the first games to integrate puzzles with solving."

>> "WE KNEW WE WERE RUNNING OUT OF THINGS WE COULD DO WITH *DOING* THINGS, SO WE ADDED HUMOR."
—LORD QUEST, DESIGNER/PROGRAMMER

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10Tacle Studios has 180 employees working in Germany, England, Belgium, Slovakia, and Singapore.

PUBLISHER: **10Tacle Publishing** DEVELOPER: **10Tacle Studios Slovakia** GENRE: **Action-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**

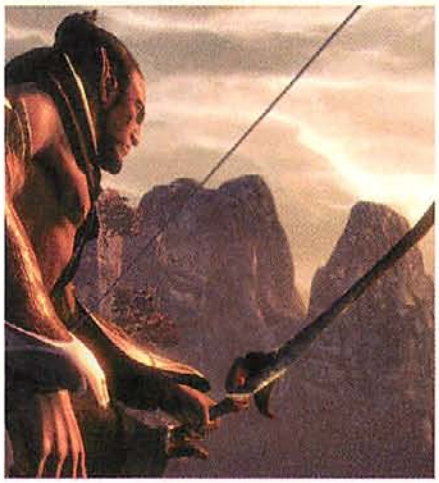
PREVIEW

TAKE TWO PARTS TOLKIEN'S ELF EPIC *The Silmarillion*, one part *Soul Calibur*, and a dash of *Diablo* (gaming's Borg—no one escapes), and out pops the ostentatious-sounding *Elveon* (pronounced like you're telling one of the Chipmunks to flip a switch: "Alvie, on!"). Elves in full plate that look like the product of a Ronnie James Dio and Sir Laurence Olivier pairing—what would E. L. Fudge say?

Forged with behold-it-and-weep Unreal Engine 3 tech, *Elveon* furnishes a story-driven campaign set in a fantasy world called Naon, where gods and elves once lived side by side in peace. Ah, peace—what's it good for? Somewhere down the line, war erupts, and suddenly it's *Gods and Elves Gone Wild*. You play one of these elves in third-person, developing skills in different combat schools, cruising through levels, and fighting elaborately modeled enemies whose physical collision points drill right down to sword ends and spear tips.

But melee-intense action games are only as good as their camera angles and controls—and in that regard, designer 10Tacle's aiming to deliver. "We implement a dynamic camera model that adapts to combat situations, always showing the relevant action in a way that lets players see what they're doing," says *Elveon*'s managing director Slavo Hazucha, noting that special moves or decisive actions get their own slow-mo zooms. But dramatic close-ups on lanky pointeared dudes in body armor?

"Elves are a heroic and popular race," explains Hazucha. Surely Orlando Bloom and R. A. Salvatore wouldn't argue. "Our game and fantasy universe depict an ancient era where the elves are still a cunning and dynamic force on the rise." Think Fabio turned Roman centurion—in other words, not the spindly, diminutive fairy creatures of legend. Or those little fellows on your cereal box. Snap, Crackle, and Pop in cuirass and greaves? Not here, thankfully. / **Matt Peckham**



"IT STARTS WITH YOUR CHOICES OF STEEL..."

Swinging swords plays center stage in Elveon, but you'll actually have four weapon classes to toy with: damage-minimal-but-dual-wieldable daggers, slow-but-smash-happy two-handed swords, bows for ranged attacks, and spears for smacking around several combatants at once. "During combat, you'll have a ton of options," explains Hazucha. "On offense, you've got basic, advanced, and expert-level attacks, plus combos and special kill moves. And on defense, [you have] blocks, quick dodges, and strafes. Your choice of weapon and armor affects your performance." So heavy-armored spearmen may be slow but deliver brutal damage to quicker, more agile dagger fighters, while the latter can dodge almost every attack and retaliate with deadly speed but relatively weak damage. And you can pack up to three weapons in battle, swapping on the fly to deal with tactically unpredictable opponents.



For much of the game you'll be fighting other elves, but 10Tacle promises plenty of "hostile interaction" with divine creatures.



Character development supports the action aspects of *Elveon* by letting you choose from several possible combat paths...



...You can become an expert in one school or an "all-rounder" who knows a bit of everything but excels at nothing.

ELVES IN FULL PLATE THAT LOOK LIKE THE PRODUCT OF A RONNIE JAMES DIO AND SIR LAURENCE OLIVIER PAIRING.



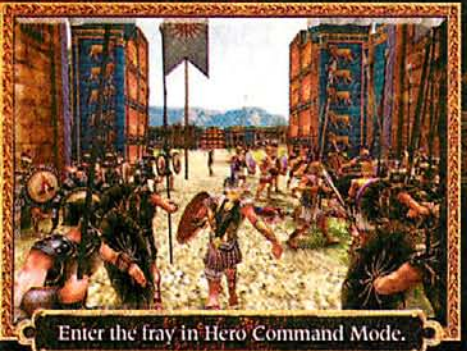
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ADVENTURE!
You can download some demos of Tim Schafer's past games at cgw.filefront.com.



1989-1990
Graduates from UC Berkeley. After a long summer of rejection letters, lands a job at Lucasfilm Games as an assistant designer and programmer on *The Secret of Monkey Island*.

1991
Completes *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* for the newly renamed LucasArts.

1992-1993
Codesigns *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle* with fellow funnyman Dave Grossman.

1993-1995
Designs the hilarious biker adventure *Full Throttle*.

THE CGW INTERVIEW:
TIM SCHAFER

Gaming's rogue comedian talks timing BY RYAN SCOTT



1996-1998
Designs *Grim Fandango*, hailed by many as one of the one of the last great adventure games.

INTERVIEW

CGW: According to Warren Spector (*CGW* #264): "Outside of Tim Schafer, I can't think of too many truly funny people in this business." Citing the repetitive nature of games and developers' inability to completely control timing, he also argues that "the very nature of games works against comedy." Your take?
Tim Schafer: I feel the opposite way—that games are inherently funny. Because you have this totally out-of-control, improvising actor on the stage: the player. And you're trying to write dialogue and script behavior for all of the other poor actors who have to share the stage with him. And if that player actor wants to jump on your head or punch you or drive over you with his car, you need to come up with a response or some set of rules that will help the supporting actor come up with his or her own response. And for me, it's much easier to improv comedy than drama. It's really hard to come up with a meaningful, dramatic reaction to the player when he jumps on your head. Maybe if Warren were improvising with that actor, he would keep it in the dramatic vein, because that's his style. I just find it hard not to comment on the ridiculous things the actor is doing.

CGW: Well, you definitely get a lot of praise for your comic timing. Is it difficult to write a funny game, as opposed to writing funny dialogue for another medium? How do you manage to keep up the hilarity?
TS: The main thing is that it's not just me—all of my games had incredibly funny teams working on them. I don't know how things ended up that way. Maybe we just got lucky. Or maybe [former LucasArts designer] Ron Gilbert gathered a bunch of funny people together to make *Monkey Island*, and those people just kept working together. Same thing is true for Double Fine [Productions]—an unusual amount of truly funny people work here. And when you put a group of people like that in a room together to brainstorm ideas for a game, their natural inclination is to crack each other up, and that shapes the game you're making.

2000-2005
Establishes Double Fine Productions after leaving LucasArts in 1999. Spends the next several years developing *Psychonauts*, which gets canceled by Microsoft in March 2004, only to get picked up by Majesco and finally published one year later.



CGW: Where do you go for inspiration when you're designing games?
TS: Different places for different games. For *Grim Fandango*, it was obviously both film noir and Mexican folklore. For *Full Throttle*, it was Hunter S. Thompson's book *Hell's Angels*. For *Psychonauts*, it was a lot of my own personal memories of being a kid at summer camp. And also my psychic abilities. Those helped inspire me. And they helped me steal ideas, too.

CGW: Including ideas on how to run an independent studio, it seems. Is Double Fine your sweetest gig yet, or do you find yourself wishing you could go back to working for a big publisher?
TS: Being out on our own, with a company where we can make our own culture and set our own priorities—that's definitely the sweeter gig as far as I'm concerned. People assume that the trade-off is stability; they think that big publishers are more stable than independent developers. And it's true that independent developers operate without a financial safety net. But, hey—we've never laid anyone off because of money. The big publishers lay off hundreds of people at a time just to save money. You get a lot more loyalty at a small company, both to and from the employees. And that's just a nicer way to work.

CGW: Do you have a tough time getting publishers excited about your original IPs?
TS: Actually, publishers are all really hungry for original IPs...but if the IP is original, then they usually want to play it safe on the gameplay—i.e., rip off *Grand Theft Auto*. If you're doing something interesting with the gameplay, then it had better be a licensed property you're doing it with. They're just trying to minimize their risk, which is understandable. But if you're a developer who wants to do innovative gameplay and an original IP, you can still do it, but you really have to have a good idea—and be prepared to fight for it.

CGW: Despite *Psychonauts*' lousy sales, we're glad you fought that particular battle. Has it been difficult for you to get funding for further projects, or has *Psychonauts*' critical acclaim opened doors?
TS: When talking to new publishers, having a game that sold millions would've definitely helped. But in the end, *Psychonauts* didn't hurt us too much, because all of the publishers we talked to held the game in high regard...and many of them liked to brag that if they'd been in charge of it, it would have sold much more.

CGW: *Psychonauts* did have lot of Tim Schafer–ness about it. But at its heart, it was a platformer...do you intend to return to that genre? Are there any other game genres where you feel you could make your own sort of personal comic, visual, and storytelling style work?
TS: Well, it's almost impossible to get a platformer made these days, but I do still love them. There are other game genres, too, that I'm excited about working with. I think any game could be made better with a well-done story and interesting visuals. Any game genre could have humor.

CGW: When anyone criticizes a story in a videogame, the response is often, "If you want a story, go read a book!" Do you think it's possible to tell a compelling, book-worthy story in a videogame? Do you even worry about that?
TS: Most of the stories in games, I have to say, are pretty awful. Some of the best ones are merely forgettable. I'm not surprised that anyone would think games would be better without story, but people don't really know what they're missing. A great story, if told in a way that doesn't hinder gameplay, makes any game better...so it's kind of a quest for me, to try to make the story as good as possible so that even people who think they don't like story will like it. And maybe then they'll even start to demand it from all their games.

CGW: So what games had some of your favorite stories?
TS: I've been trying to think of one for about five minutes now, but I can't. Maybe there's a great story in a game that I'm just forgetting, but I'm really having trouble remembering what it is. Games have a long way to go before their stories can compare to what's offered in the best books and movies.

CGW: Five favorite games of all time, then?
TS: *Super Mario 64*, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, *Tomb Raider*, *Skies of Arcadia*, and *Katamari Damacy*.

CGW: Tim, you console fanboy. Back on the subject of PC games, are you working on anything new? We're hearing rumors....
TS: Yes, we are working on something brand new right now. But it's still under wraps, so I can't say anything about it—except that we're all really excited about it and already having fun playing it. Double Fine is kind of in Willy Wonka mode—you know, where the factory doors are shut and nobody can know what's going on inside. Just us Oompa-Loompas, toiling away, stirring the secret chocolate.

CGW: Have you ever considered pursuing animation or other forms of media where innovation and off-the-wall ideas seem to be more welcome (à la *Oddworld* creator Lorne Lanning)? What keeps you making games?
TS: We've talked to some people about making a *Psychonauts* movie, and I can't say I found film people to be any more brave or experimental than gaming people. I mean, when was the last time you saw a movie that was half as creative as *Katamari Damacy*?

Still, I totally understand Lorne's frustration. The business side of getting a game made is incredibly demoralizing. Many forces align to discourage creativity and encourage mediocrity and safe, derivative ideas. But for me, those same forces are part of the reason I keep going; they just make me so mad. I can't stand the thought of those jerks winning. I feel so lucky every time I get to make another game, because every time we make something good, it's like punching those jerks in the face.

CGW: OK, last question. Since the prospect of another *Monkey Island* game is virtually nil, please shed some light on this eternal question for us: Just what is the secret of *Monkey Island*?
TS: Oh, that. I don't know why Ron won't tell people that. It's simple: [Recurring *Monkey Island* character] Herman Toothrot has both male and female reproductive organs.

ALONE IN THE DARK

Survival of the fittest

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Eden Studios** GENRE: **Survival-horror** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

PREVIEW

"WE'VE BEEN INSPIRED BY TV SERIES like *Lost*, *24*, and *Prison Break*," says David Nadal, game director for Eden Studios' upcoming survival-horror specimen *Alone in the Dark*. "We're addicted to these series, and we wanted to capture that captivation in terms of narration."

Hence Eden's novel approach to the trendy notion of episodic content: Unlike Ritual's *SiN Episodes* or Valve's *Half-Life 2* installments (see reviews on pgs. 80-81), *Alone in the Dark* will be sold as a full 'season' of 10 to 15 episodes (roughly one hour apiece) right out of the box—all of the recurring peaks and cliff-hangers, none of the annoying five-month waits. "When you put the game down and when you come back," says Nadal, "you'll be presented with 'coming next' and 'previously on *AITD*' clips. The beauty of the episodic format is that we have the option of releasing 'lost' episodes after the game ships, as well as additional ones, in various formats."

If you're not convinced that the episodic structure (gimmick?) is any different from traditional level structure, there's more to *AITD* than that: Eden is trying to "evolve" past the genre's traditional awkward fighting and statue-and-medallion puzzles, citing the console (and PC, come September) game *Resident Evil 4* as the first title to successfully break the mold that its ancestor (and the original *Alone in the Dark* long, long ago) helped create: "When *RE4* came out, there were some aspects of it that were similar to what we're doing in *AITD*, and this comforted us...players do want an evolution, a renewal, even if it could be risky."

As for evidence of evolution: *AITD* takes place in New York's Central Park—Eden's attempt to take surviving horror out of endless hallways and out into the open. And in expanding the stage, Nadal hopes to expand the arsenal. "We have your typical handguns and similar weapons," he says, "but we really want players to imagine, 'What happens if the enemy can't be killed with bullets?'" Eden aims to make the environment your weapon, keeping players' eyes on their surroundings to combat the scary things. "Elements in the environment are built on real-world rules, so you'll be able to interact instinctively with each situation."

While that may sound like an alternate way to say "our game has physics and rolling barrels," Nadal offers up a car interior as a concrete example: "Imagine the front of the car is being attacked, and the player jumps into the backseat to hide behind and avoid the attacks...players can use the centralized locking system to lock the car doors, use the headlights to light up a dark area—the car is fully functional, as one would expect in real life." Other evolutionary evidence is a little more anomalous, including the how-much-control-is-too-much-control ability to blink protagonist Edward Carnby's eyes at will—to wipe away visions of Lovecraftian madness, we assume. But, as Lovecraft would tell you, assuming can get your face torn off by the Dark Young of Shub-Niggurath. / Sean Molloy



▲ Hang in there, baby!



▲ According to Nadal, "The best horror games in the past few years were *Half-Life* and *Resident Evil 4*."



▲ Expect *Alone in the Dark* to make ample use of cliff-hangers at the end of episodes.

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GLADSTONED

THE BETTER HALF

HEY, DARREN? ARE YOU EVER GOING to stop playing *Rise of Legends* and write your column?

"Taste my industrial might, you filthy Cuotl bitches!"

Fine! Then I'll do it. I mean, seriously, it can't be that hard. Yes, I'm the "lucky" lady—Darren's fiancée, Amy. And I—like so many other modern women—have to deal day in and day out with a significant other who spends a significant amount of time playing games. The biggest problem for me is that, half the time, I can't tell if he's goofing off or playing a game for work.



▲ Manny Calavera is the other man in her life.

The thing about marrying a gamer is that you end up with this grown, nerdish man-child wearing a Strong Bad T-shirt and playing *New Super Mario Bros.* on his DS Lite...I can't believe that I even know what these things are!

Since the beginning of our relationship, Darren has constantly tried to get me involved in his hobby/job. I'm not saying that I don't appreciate it; I'm just not into videogames. Well, that's not entirely true. I did love playing *Myst* with my cousin as a child. Unfortunately, Darren heard me say that once, and he's held onto hope ever since. He'll say, "Hey, you've just gotta try this game!" Um, no I don't. *America's Next Top Model* starts in five minutes.

"You've got to be fin' kidding me! No way could he get past my defenses! I'm an iron goddamn curtain!"***

Then, on a flight to New York, I watched Darren play *Grim Fandango* to pass the time. And I've got to say—it actually looked interesting. You're this grim reaper who goes around solving puzzles, and it has a cool *Casablanca* feel to it. Now this was a game I could get into. I don't have to kill anything, and I'm not some fake-looking beeha with giant boobs.

After four years together, he finally figured me out. All he had to do was play a game in front of me that I might like—no pressure, no begging—and quietly hope I'd show some interest. I've since beaten his ass at *Bookworm*, solved *Indigo Prophecy*, and helped him create countless *City of Heroes* characters. The worst for me, though, was *The Da Vinci Code*. Darren knows that I really loved the book, so he brought the game home. One night, I ditched out on a party to stay home and play for five hours. What has he done to me? You know something's wrong when you'd rather play a game than plan your wedding.

"God-fing-dammit! A motherf***ing City of f***ing Vengeance?! Ah, crap. Hey, Aim! I'm done. You can use the computer now!"***

'Kay, gotta go! Bye!/Amy...er...I mean Darren Gladstone



Darren Gladstone
Got a bone to pick with the future Mrs. Gladstone (or Darren)? E-mail darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com.

>> "...YOU END UP WITH A NERDISH MAN-CHILD WEARING A STRONG BAD T-SHIRT AND PLAYING NEW SUPER MARIO BROTHERS ON HIS DS LITE."

DEVELOPER'S DESKTOP What games are *they* playing?



RITUAL ENTERTAINMENT'S Tom Mustaine works overtime to get the first season of *SiN Episodes* on the air. When he isn't on deadline (or stuck answering our dumb questions), he wishes he had time to play these games again.

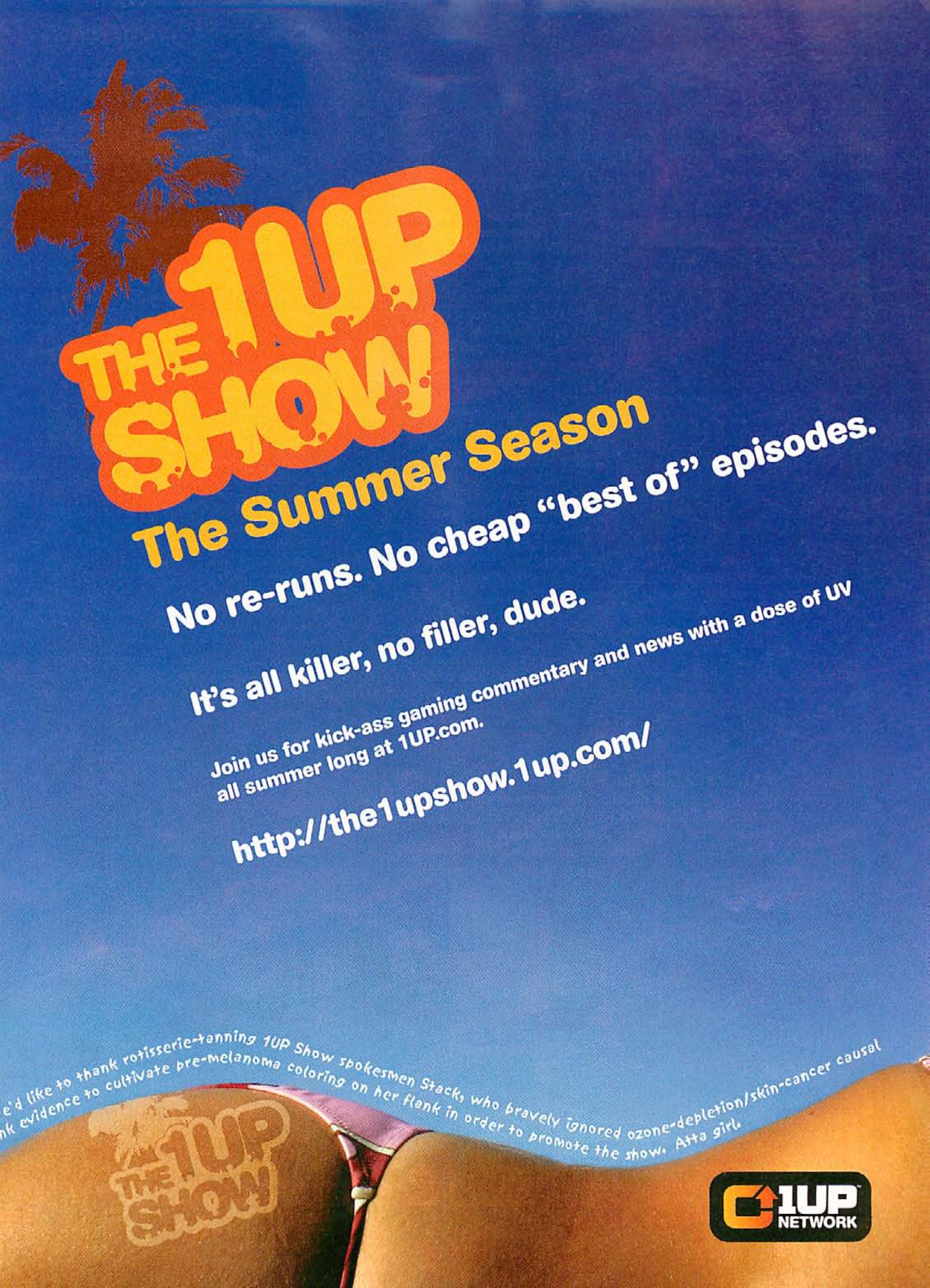
M.U.L.E. – "Mining for Smithore and Crystite on the planet Irata is still amazingly fun to this day. *M.U.L.E.* is one of the most replayable and enjoyable games ever made—I still frequently play this one old-school game."

NUCLEAR WAR – "Based on the board game of the same name, it's 100 percent replayable and always fun. Setting up a 100-megaton nuclear warhead gets an awe-inspired "Oooooohhhh!" from the audience. Then firing it over at Ronnie Raygun's or Kookamamie's city that just launched a propaganda attack my way? One word: satisfaction."

ULTIMATE DOOM – "Shooting demons never gets old in my book. The first episode of the original *Doom* was just so perfectly done; I can play that episode over and over. Then, the final episode of *Ultimate Doom* offered a challenge for the most hardcore *Doom*ers."

STREET FIGHTER II – "A solid year of my life disappeared thanks to this game. Just about every dollar I earned went toward honing my Ryu and Guile skills, along with trying feverishly to beat the game without losing a round in order to get the supersecret special credits."

WARCRAFT II – "The music alone is enough to keep me from going nuts on a desert island, but the gameplay always keeps me coming back for more. This is one of the few games that took over my life for months—after the first multiplayer session with friends, I would spend days trying to derive the optimum build strategy to outwit the computer and friends. The island would allow me time to sharpen those skills."


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e'd like to thank rotisserie-tanning 1UP Show spokesmen Stack, who bravely ignored ozone-depletion/skin-cancer causal nk evidence to cultivate pre-melanoma coloring on her flank in order to promote the show. Atta girl.
THE 1UP SHOW
1UP NETWORK

HUXLEY

PUBLISHER: **Webzen**
DEVELOPER: **Webzen**
GENRE: **MMOFPS/RPG**
RELEASE DATE: **2007**

Stalk 'em by fours, smoke 'em in hundreds



Didn't your momma tell you to sit up straight?

PREVIEW

AGORAPHOBIC? GET OVER IT—South Korean dev Webzen's punched-up hybrid role-playing shooter *Huxley* literally swarms you with opponents. In treeless cities where Orient meets Occident, up to 5,000 twitchy gunslingers per server strut and scramble through neon-baked boroughs crammed with clubs, pubs, arms barkers, and Soviet-style slabs of ruddy concrete player-purchasable housing.

The skinny? Near-future climate change blisters the earth while a mysterious substance splits humans into two species: Sapiens and Alternatives, each fighting for an energy source created by their would-be savior, the inscrutable writer-Aldous-inspired scientist named Huxley. Haggling and mission mobilizing occur in each side's city (a third houses a hostile NPC race of monstrous Hybrids and integrates Xbox 360 players, who can fight for their liberation), while battles shake out in external "zones" supporting up to 200 simultaneous combatants. With street dates still a full year away, we caught up with *Huxley* producer Kijong Kang for a fill-in. / **Matt Peckham**

CGW: Two-hundred players in *Battlefield* 2–style brawls sounds pretty insane. How do you manage the chatter?
Kijong Kang: If everyone communicated in open channels, chaos would erupt, so squads are the basic unit for small-scale communications, and squad leaders serve as hubs for other communications units. We use units and hubs to keep it simple. Think four-player squads fighting in 200-player-maximum battle zones—though, of course, individual, nonsquad play will also be possible.

CGW: What about audiovisual communications? How do you plan to mitigate "overtalk" or "cross-babble"?
KK: We're supporting VOIP cross-platform for both the PC and Xbox 360 versions, but VOIP support without care can result in audio mash-ups, as you say, especially in tactical communities. So voice comms will be free and open in squads, but only squad leaders will be able to communicate with other squads. In other words, the squad leader becomes the communication hub.

CGW: Does *Huxley's* campaign story have a terminal point?
KK: *Huxley*'s base story does have a finishing point, but it simply leads to the start of another mystery. Not a repetitive chain, but, rather, one story's end will be connected to another's beginning. At the start, you'll be developing your character and learning about the history of the world. Along the way, you're establishing your identity and rep, making money and such, but once that process is complete, you'll experience a radical shift. In the first story campaign, for instance, you join a group that you've been fighting as an enemy, then have to develop a reputation in that group, and so on.

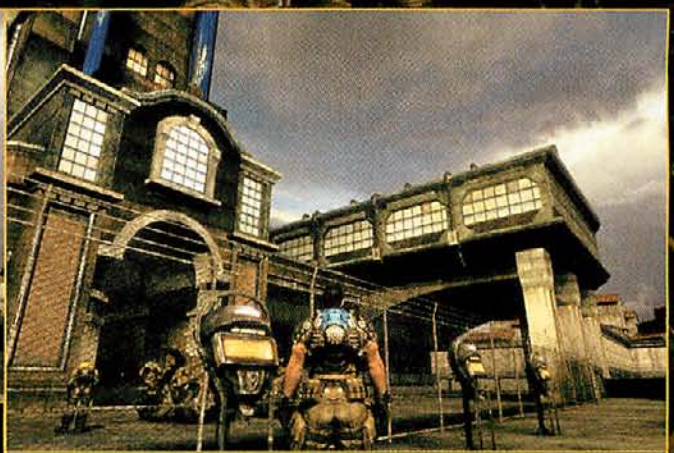
CGW: With Xbox 360 and PC players fragging in tandem, won't keyboard-and-mouse jockeys have an unfair advantage?
KK: The disparity between a keyboard/mouse interface and a control pad is inherent, and we can't overcome it, but the control pad has its own merits. We guarantee that each interface will be enjoyable without obstacles. [And] it's actually not a full-fledged war between PC players and Xbox 360 players. Instead, their relationship will be mutually cooperative. For example, if an Xbox 360 player must get by some enemy, he might drive a vehicle taking advantage of the control pad's analog stick while the PC player hops on back and frags enemies by utilizing the keyboard/mouse. In other situations, we might offset an Xbox 360 player's control issues by putting him behind an exceptionally powerful turret to guard against PC player incursions. It's intuitively cooperative.

ORDER OF OPERATIONS: PVP

No one's going to accuse Webzen of thinking small, but *Huxley* still sounds remarkably focused. This won't be *World of WarCraft* with contiguous, borderless regions and a dozen races—the idea in *Huxley* is to get you running and gunning as fast as possible.



1 Whether fishing for battles, scoping missions, or just plain loitering, everything pivots around *Huxley*'s persistent cities. Sapien players start here in the expansive megalopolis Nostalonia. If you think it looks a little empty, just imagine up to 5,000 players snarling its streets and structures. In cities, you'll form clans, trade weapons and armor, buy goods at market, and prep for your next quest or tussle.



2 When you're ready to frag, just locate a transport and hop a ride to the Battle Map of your choice: from straight-up deathmatch and capture-the-flag layouts to finger-sizzling 100-on-100 PVP battles.



Buddy up in squads of six.



These guys are about to ruin someone's day.

CHOCKABLOCK INTERLOCK

Even in (relatively) small 32-player online FPS brawls, battles can take forever, and you needn't look far to find players feeling lost in the fray. How to handle shootouts that are six times as crowded? "Four-player squads are really central to gameplay," says Kang, explaining that squads must remain within a certain range of each other. "Squads are all about perks. Squad leaders can help up fallen members and speed their shield or HP recovery, or increase their attack and defense points depending on the squad type."

But what's really interesting is how Webzen's planning to integrate all those squads into broader groups without suffering "playground bully" problems. "Say squads with improved attributes come together to wield more power," proposes Kang. "As more and more squads aggregate, their perks start to weaken or suffer penalties, so even if a small number of squads form an alliance to achieve great destroying power, the numbers for the destroying power of one squad are actually higher. Thus, players keep away from squad gathering, and they naturally come to fight on a squad-to-squad level."



"Do I get one of those things, or am I walking home?"

STOCKED UP

Korean developer/publisher Webzen was founded in 2000 and received its NASDAQ listing in 2003.

>> "THE DISPARITY BETWEEN A KEYBOARD/MOUSE INTERFACE AND A CONTROL PAD IS INHERENT, AND WE CAN'T OVERCOME IT, BUT THE CONTROL PAD HAS ITS OWN MERITS."

–KIJONG KANG, PRODUCER



3 Once you're in a Battle Map, you'll greet your teammates, strategize, then scramble. In this control point map, teamwork and tactical finesse are essential to secure key locations and hold them against individual squads or entire platoons of opponents.



4 Once your side nabs a control point, you can either dig in or leave the area and risk losing it to the opposition. Deciding what to do in situations like this will often hinge on squad commanders, who can communicate with each other to execute broader tactical flourishes like platoon links-ups or battle-line leapfrogging.

BALANCING ACT

Making *Battlefield 2142* fair and fun

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **DICE** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **September**

WITH *BATTLEFIELD* AND OTHER SHOOTERS of its clusterfrag ilk, fair is fun. Tick your first-person shooter of tomorrow's feature boxes from top to bottom, battle walkers to Titan hover-carriers, persistent ranking systems to friends-list functionality, and crickets still chirp in those 64-man servers if the give and take aren't balanced. We grill senior producer Marcus Nilsson on what developer DICE is doing to equalize the easy-to-tip scales of *Battlefield 2142*'s revamped class system and Titan mode. / Shawn Elliott

"In the best of worlds, your antivehicle weapon would take out a battle walker with a single shot," says Nilsson, "but sitting in one of the most powerful monsters on the battlefield and suddenly exploding without a warning is far from fun. We solved the problem by implementing a warning mechanism and skill-based shielding system."



DICE insists *2142*'s server browser (not shown) is 600 percent speedier than *BF2*'s.



Drop the Titan's shields and taxi to its deck in one-man delivery pods.



Automated antigrav turrets shadow support troopers.

"OUR JOB IS TO MAKE SURE THAT EVERY POSSIBLE OUTCOME IS BALANCED AGAINST EVERY OTHER POSSIBLE OUTCOME."

–MARCUS NILSSON, SENIOR PRODUCER

REVISED RUCKSACK



▲ *2142*'s kit-customization interface (still a work in progress) gives players access to four core classes.

2142 ABANDONS *BATTLEFIELD 2*'S fixed classes for a more modular solution: four flexible base kits, each comprising two categories of specialization (paired sniper and spec-ops slots, for instance). Crackerjack play nets access to a pool of kit-specific, persistent upgrades—40 to 45 varieties of guns and gear that, when combined and recombined, magnify the infantryman's means to the enemy's end.

"The rationale behind the system is simple," says Nilsson. "Conforming to a small selection of prefab kits is somewhat limiting, and this way we can make sure things feel fresh month in, month out. Starting with four core classes establishes a stable, flexible foundation. Trust me—a completely wide open, customizable system with no classes doesn't work. But beyond that core, we're handing the customization over to the gamers. Our job behind the scenes is to make sure that every possible custom outcome is balanced against every other possible outcome...no problem, right?" That Nilsson leans more toward tongue-in-cheek than cocksure is encouraging, as anyone with experience knows better than to believe in absolutes when teeter-tottering checks and balances.

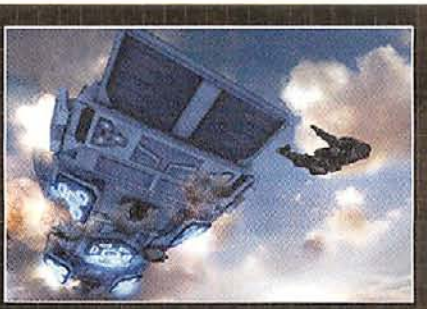
"Balance is a delicate matter, and we've made our share of mistakes. *Battlefield Vietnam*'s M60/LAV combination made the support soldier totally overpowered; in a split second, it became the only class people played. Obviously, that isn't fun. Imagine yourself shouting for a medic, but finding only assault soldiers because their kit is the best." Nor does variety in principle guarantee the same in practice. Think *Diablo II*'s googolplex skills, which promised "unpredictable" PVP contests—in which everyone was either a meteorb sorceress or whirlwind barbarian.

"Nothing substitutes experience," Nilsson says, "and we've gathered info about how people play our games over the years. Our software determines where people play, spawn, die, and what they're doing during sessions. After we have an alpha version, DICE plays for 12 hours a day to find potential exploits and errors. And again, it demands iteration, as all items are interconnected in ways impossible to assess without plenty of time to play-test and tweak." Finally, DICE enlists fans to ferret out the unexpected in beta tests. (Now if only they'd meter and curb possibilities for antisocial practices such as forced teamkills *in addition to* unfair play.)

2142's mix-and-matchable gear not only offers ongoing incentive to rise through the ranks (a much more rapid process here than in *BF2*), but for players to work with one another, too. Sustained commitment to a single squad (and adherence to its leader's commands) generates points for the group, which members can then spend on equipment otherwise accessible only to those of higher rank. And while access lasts only as long as you stay in one squad (perks persist across map changes so long as you're in the same server), the feature insures against buyer's remorse, doubling as an opportunity to test-drive before signing on the dotted line. Suspect the EMP mine, which cripples vehicles and confuses turret traversal, is more your style? Try it and see.

CLASH OF THE TITANS

2142'S TITAN MODE ATTEMPTS TO predictably channel player activity, especially where public players aren't always tuned into the strategic and tactical value of specific targets. Instead of seizing capture points and sapping "tickets," you sink the other side's commander-controlled airborne warship—first nuking its shields Death Star–style, and then boarding the craft in pods before mushroom-clouding its reactor core. "While Titan mode makes people think more about the end objective and the importance of controlling sectors," Nilsson says, "the sandbox experience is still central. We still aren't forcing players down a particular path; we want to fine-tune environments and scenarios that naturally attract action, while assuring no two games are ever the same. It's a *fine line*, but one that we've focused on nailing throughout the history of the franchise."







"Taking out a Titan is tough," he continues, "and we've designed it so teams need to spread resources around the battlefield to assure victory. For example, after taking the opposition's shields down, you still have to think about its strategically placed missile silos that can attack *your* Titan, quickly turning the tide. Then, Titans are huge maps-within-a-map with multiple choke points, so fighting is frantic without feeling forced with overt objectives."

THE HOT SHEET

TEN THINGS THAT ROCK *CGW*'S WORLD



1 BATTLEFIELD 2 AUTOLOADER

Explosions, crashes, and cursing—and that was before your *Battlefield 2* match even started. In-game server searches used to end in misery, but not anymore. Launch the *BF2* AutoLoader (battlefield2.filefront.com), double-click an open server, and jump into the game.



2 BROKEN SAINTS: THE ANIMATED COMIC EPIC

Four strangers from around the globe share apocalyptic visions. No, it's not anime—*Broken Saints* is a noir graphic novel brought to brooding life with mesmerizing comic-book-style visuals. This DVD set collects the original Flash-hewn Web episodes and adds a full-cast voiceover track.



3 WOLFMOTHER

Sometimes you don't need synths, turntable scratchmasters, or fancy producers—sometimes you just need *rock*. With with the ferocity of Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, Wolfmother's debut disc makes you ask, "Head-slamming stadium rawk, where have you been?"

4 RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

We knew that the RTS sequel to *Rise of Nations* was going to be good, but *damn*. *Rise of Legends* does an amazing job of uniting the conquer-the-world *Risk*-style maps of *RON* with a deep story line that blends three genuinely unique factions.



5 FINAL DESTINATION 3

Scares and quality aside, this horror movie has a neat twist for its DVD release: At key "Choose Your Fate" moments, you decide how, when, and if people die. This steers which alternate takes of the film you watch. Any chance we can decide who writes the next script?



6 INFINITE DUNGEONS



Can't wait for *Neverwinter Nights 2*? Hit nwn.bioware.com, where eight bucks can buy owners of the original *NWN* randomly generated adventures into Undermountain. Cruise through the 20-plus hours of gameplay spelunking solo, with buddies, or racing against others to the dungeon's chewy center.



7 THE POLITICAL GAME

Don't worry if your natural gut reaction to playing the Web-based *Darfur Is Dying* (darfurisdying.com) is "This game sucks! I keep losing!" That's the point. Sometimes life just isn't fair.

8 THE MATADOR

Can a mild-mannered businessman be friends with a burned-out hit man? Pierce Brosnan plays the flaky "facilitator of fatalities" with perfect pitch in this black comedy.





9 MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM

Itching to get the big-screen gaming experience on your PSP? *Monster Hunter Freedom* does a surprisingly good job of submerging you into its gorgeous handheld world. Stalk prey online with friends, or stay offline and continue not talking to the scary people on the bus.



10 THE FIVE FISTS OF SCIENCE

Nikola Tesla and Samuel Clemens—buddies, con men, and professional ass-kickers. Both must take down the evil J.P. Morgan and... uh...Thomas Edison? Graphic-novel writer Matt Fraction either has an awesome imagination or a tinfoil hat to keep out alien mind-control rays.

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games!

JULY 2006	PUBLISHER
CivCity: Rome	2K Games
Civilization IV: Warlords	2K Games
FlatOut 2	Vivendi Games
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Glory of the Roman Empire	CDV Software
Mage Knight Apocalypse	Namco Bandai
Prey	2K Games
AUGUST 2006	
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft
El Matador	Cenega
Madden NFL 07	Electronic Arts
Ship Simulator 2006	DreamCatcher
Specnaz: Project Wolf	Tri Synergy
TimeShift	Atari
Train Master	Tri Synergy
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
SEPTEMBER 2006	
ArchLord: The Legend of Chantra	Codemasters
The Aura 2: Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
Caesar IV	Vivendi Games
Call of Juarez	Ubisoft
Company of Heroes	THQ
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic	Ubisoft
Faces of War	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	LucasArts
Maelstrom	Codemasters
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
Reservoir Dogs	Eidos Interactive
Scarface: The World Is Yours	Vivendi Games
Splinter Cell Double Agent	Ubisoft
Stronghold Legends	2K Games
OCTOBER 2006	
Phantasy Star Universe	Sega
Sid Meier's Railroads!	2K Games
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
Unreal Tournament 2007	Midway
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard
FALL/WINTER 2006	
Battlefield 2142	Electronic Arts
F.E.A.R. Extraction Point	Vivendi Games
Gothic 3	Aspyr
Star Trek: Legacy	Bethesda Softworks



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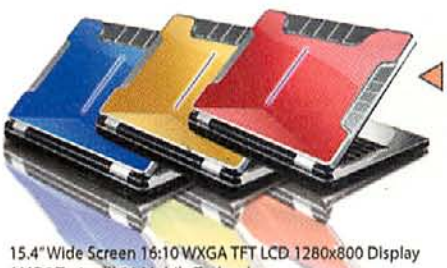
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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD'S

OVERRATED UN

10¢ AUG. 2006 NO. 265

THE LAST WORD ON THE TRIVIAL AND TRIUMPHANT IN PC GAMING.

FORGET ABOUT WHAT'S HOT and what's not—anyone can tell you that. Over the course of the next few pages, CGW's know-it-all editors take PC gaming's overhyped, overexposed egos down a peg and put the overlooked underdogs up on pedestals./

GAME FEATURE

OVERRATED:

CUSTOMIZABLE FACE TECHNOLOGY ▸

You meticulously craft the visage that screams "you"—adjust the chin angle, slide your eyes a millimeter farther apart, match your iris color to the highlights in your hair—and then promptly cover it in a garish helmet and spend 99 percent of your time playing from a first-person perspective. Looking for a mirror, no doubt.

UNDERRATED:

ONLINE MATCHMAKING

We can think of countless examples of how *not* to do PC friends lists, meeting rooms, and online-gaming pair-up services. How sad is it that a console figured out how to do it right first?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY Rory Manion



GAME-INDUSTRY VILLAIN

OVERRATED:

JACK THOMPSON

The Miami attorney and antigaming crackpot crusader isn't a real threat—he's just an angry old man shouting at kids to get off his lawn. So let him rant and rave; he'll bury himself with his own lunacy.

UNDERRATED:

PIRATES

You want to blame StarForce copy protection for screwing up computers? Go right ahead—it sucks. Just remember that we wouldn't even need it in the first place if there were fewer pirates sailing the digital seas. Yeah, we're looking at *you*.



GENRE

OVERRATED:

ADVENTURE GAMES

The days of the classic Sierra and LucasArts adventure games are done—stop whining for your damn *Space Quest* sequels already. Yes, we loved 'em, too...but it's time to find another thinking man's genre. And is randomly clicking a bottle cap, a bottle of hair tonic, and a boll weevil until they "combine" *really* thinking?

UNDERRATED:

TURN-BASED STRATEGY ▲

Outside of games with the word *Civilization* in the title and whatever geeky war games contributing editor Bruce Geryk digs up each month, this brain-flexing genre is severely neglected. New *Age of Wonders*, anyone? (But see our review of *Heroes of Might and Magic V* in this issue for another good one!)

QUEST

OVERRATED:

KILL 'N' COLLECT ▲

Mingo tells you to kill 10 migrant workers and take their shoes (feet still attached). OK, you say. Good job, he says—here's a handful of clink for your trouble. But wait, what did those workers ever do to *you*? Looking back, Mingo's introductory monologue may have contained one Freudian slip too many ("Pleasure to eat you...er, *meet* you."), but it's too late. The blood of the proletariat is already on your hands.

UNDERRATED:

MORAL PERIL

Glarthir, paranoid wood elf of *Oblivion*'s Skingrad, thinks his neighbors are watching him. You investigate. You make judgment calls based on—*gasp*!—the personalities of NPCs and—*double gasp*!—your own ethics. People start dying as a result of your actions, and for the rest of your days, you're never quite sure you did the right thing...but at least you got to make that decision yourself.

DERRATED LIST

APPROVED BY THE HYPE BOARD
The following PC-gaming concepts and products are certified to be 100% overvalued or underappreciated.



VISUAL TECHNIQUE

OVERRATED:

PHOTOREALISM

Roboticist Masahiro Mori theorized that, as automatons are made increasingly human-looking, people respond more and more favorably—until you reach a point *just before* perfect realism, the so-called "Uncanny Valley," to which people respond with revulsion and disgust.

UNDERRATED:

ART DIRECTION

Interestingly designed characters, carefully selected color schemes, a distinctive style—hell, even interesting-looking *icons*—trump huge polygon counts and high-tech jargon any day. Just ask the 6 million or so people still playing *World of WarCraft* day in and day out.

GAMING BEVERAGE

OVERRATED:

THE VERY IDEA OF MARKETERS INSISTING WE NEED A GAMING BEVERAGE ▲

When BillyBob428 signs up for message-board access and his first post is "What's your fave thirst quencher?" don't buy him. "We're Zima men, Bobby—and sadly, they can't afford your services."

UNDERRATED:

THE NONGAMING BEVERAGE

Reading-*CGW* beverage. Deuce-dropping beverage. Scratchin'-scratch-offs beverage. Pullin'-pull-tabs beverage....



LEVEL

OVERRATED:

ANYTHING BASED ON A *STAR WARS* MOVIE BATTLE ◀

Blowing up the Death Star: fun. Blowing up the Death Star for the 27th time: not so much. And if we have to play through one more Hoth snowspeeder level, we're gonna go on a youngling-slaughtering rampage at some unsuspecting dev house.

UNDERRATED:

FINAL LEVEL OF *HALF-LIFE 2*

"Cakewalk," they complain—but instead of tapping the "bigger, badder" trope's grueling progress and impossible boss, *Half-Life 2*'s last level trumps convention with its godlike gravity gun.



MMORPG MECHANIC

OVERRATED:

RAIDS ▲

From the moment you get home from work until three hours after you should've been in bed, you're assisting the guild—and for what? Just to give that greedy priest in your guild's old-boy oligarchy *yet another* Cuff of Critical Impedance, while you're still wearing a Sleeve of Mere Thwarting? No, we're not bitter.

UNDERRATED:

QUICK QUESTS

That's right—we like our quests the way we like our /pizza: done in 30 minutes or less. So give us more quick-yet-rewarding missions that won't totally screw with our social lives.

BONUS BUY: 2 FOR 1!!!

NARRATIVE DEVICE

OVERRATED:

IN-GAME-ENGINE CINEMATICS

It started with full-motion video of Kari Wuhrer commanding and conquering while Mark Hamill chewed up the fake space scenery with giant kitty puppets. These days: painful in-game close-ups on graphic mannequins with sutured lips. Which is worse?

UNDERRATED:

NO CUT-SCENES AT ALL

How about we let the gameplay do the talking? Take a lesson from what's been happening in games like *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, where the story unfolds as you play.

INFLUENTIAL GAME

OVERRATED:

BATTLEFIELD 1942

People tag every open multiplayer firefight as a *Battlefield* clone for a reason: It's really fun. But folks have a seriously short-term memory. *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis* did the same thing and came out a year before *BF1942*.

UNDERRATED:

TRIBES

If you want to get technical, *Tribes* laid the groundwork for multiplayer objective-based outdoor battles, team dynamics, and strategy in a first-person shooter. Build emplacements, control vehicles—but the signature jetpacks inspire either love or loathing. Oh, and bonus: *Tribes* is now freely available online.





RPG CHARACTER CLASS

OVERRATED:

TANK

The way of the warrior: Stand around, take damage, and then aggro the whole damn zone, mistakenly thinking you're invincible. Linchpins to success? Most MMORPG pick-up groups say yes. We say meh.

UNDERRATED:

CROWD CONTROL ▲

That quiet mesmer/enchanter/illusionist hanging out in the back might not dish out the big damage, but that complex web of debilitating status effects and damage-prevention spells is saving your ass in more ways than you probably realize.

GOOD GAME

OVERRATED:

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Some of us here at *CGW* have so many freakin' hours logged in *WOW* now that it (almost) makes us sorry the damn thing exists. And if we have to do Uldaman one more time, we're gonna spaz out. Please, somebody—anybody—give us an alternative to this game already.

UNDERRATED:

***DARWINIA* ▲**

No hype, no budget, and before Steam, you'd be lucky to have even heard of *Darwinia*'s *Tron*-like look at computer life. Packed snugly into its 50MB frame are strategy, action, creativity, and surreal images you'll remember longer than the latest HDR-lighting extravaganza.



BAD GAME

OVERRATED:

***LEISURE SUIT LARRY: MAGNA CUM LAUDE* ▲**

Yeah, we'll admit it—despite its lame jokes, nudity, watered-down minigames (guide a sperm cell into a fart cloud? HAW!), and digitized boob (Larry), at least the game didn't crash. Even though we wished it had.

UNDERRATED:

BET ON SOLDIER

Five things you could've bet on: Voice acting that makes less sense than the WTF?-worthy title; Crisco-dipped characters; frequent crashes; the game being quietly excreted onto store shelves; inclusion in our Overrated/Underrated list.



ONLINE GAMER

OVERRATED:

MR. DEADLY SERIOUS

Superserious power-levelers and tourney players who start off talking up their stats and end up going off about their Yahoo! Personals conquests and gun collections.

UNDERRATED:

GOOFBALL GRIEFER ▲

Don't sweat it when you see a counter-terrorist strutting his stuff on a flashing *Dance Dance Revolution*–mat spray tag. Give it up for the good-natured goof-offs who make the grind fun again.



PLACE TO BUY GAMES

OVERRATED:

RETAIL STORES

Drive 10 miles, stand in line behind mouth-breathing morons, and find out that only those who preordered can buy a copy. And they wonder why gamers are violent.

UNDERRATED:

E-TAIL ▲

Buy games from the comfort of our own homes and download them directly to our PCs? Count us in. It's just as appealing to developers who'd never get their games into stores. We love you, Steam. All is forgiven.

SUPERSPECIAL BONUS COUPON!

Suffering from immersion deficiency? Feeling like your 3D environments aren't fully interactive enough? The latest games simply aren't changing the way you think, live, or breathe? We've got the cure! Clip this coupon, and exchange it at your nearest Mega Hype Center today for your very own dose of Buzztastic Superawesomeness (B.S.). Hurry, though—supplies are limited! And remember, kids—if you haven't heard about it, it ain't worth s***! NOT VALID FOR GAMERS WHO CAN FORM THEIR OWN OPINIONS



FPS CLASS

OVERRATED:

SNIPER ▲

OneShotOneKill. Vassili_Zaitsev. ISnipe. While you trade shots with other jerk-off snipers in your game-within-a-game, your team is quietly trying to, ya know, win.

UNDERRATED:

ENGINEER

Here's to the unsung, underplayed hero: the engineer who patches up the tank that goes out to nab 30 frags. He's the guy who sits tight in the base setting up sentry stations while ISnipe fights his pointless sniper war of attrition. F*** you, ISnipe.

GAMER STEREOTYPE

OVERRATED:

CORPORATE-SPONSORED GLAM-GRRL GAMERS THAT'LL, LIKE, TOTALLY KICK YOUR ASS ▶

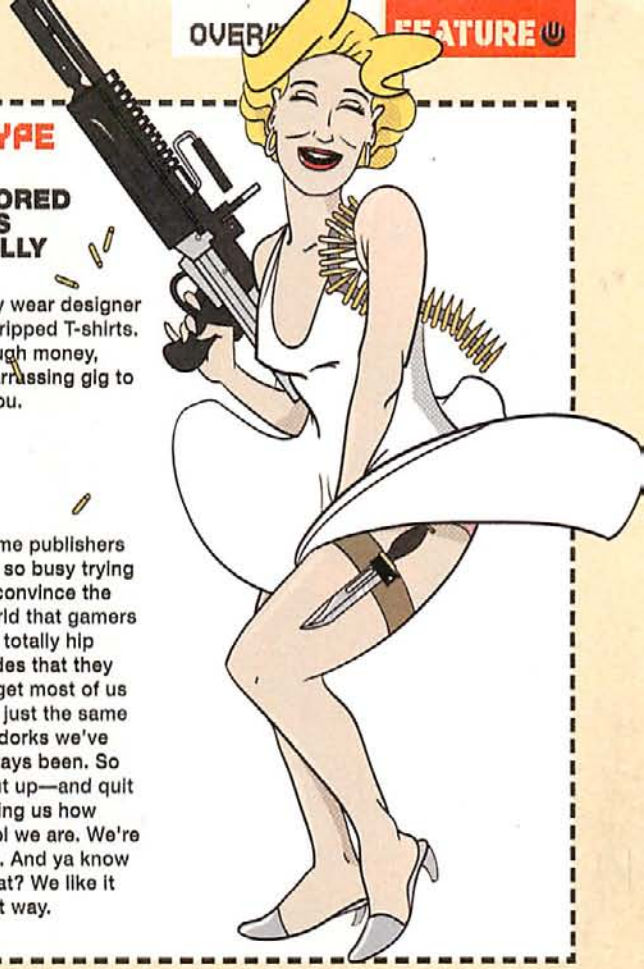
They're hot. They're sexy. They wear designer horn-rimmed glasses and $80 ripped T-shirts. And as soon as they earn enough money, they're going to quit this embarrassing gig to get far away from geeks like you.

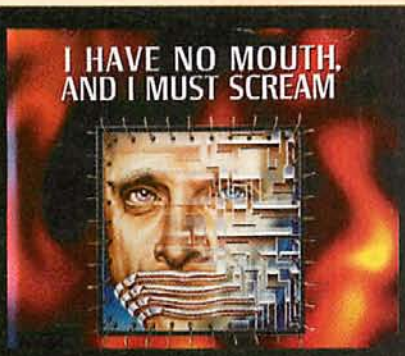
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PEOPLE WHO JUST PLAY GAMES



Game publishers are so busy trying to convince the world that gamers are totally hip dudes that they forget most of us are just the same ol' dorks we've always been. So shut up—and quit telling us how cool we are. We're not. And ya know what? We like it that way.





INDUSTRY POSITION

OVERRATED:

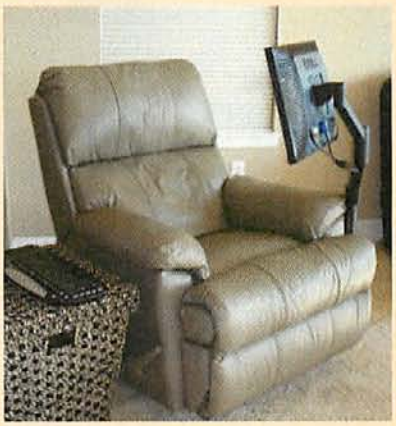
FAMOUS WRITERS ▲

Every so often, a respectable novelist or Hollywood script writer will slum it and try his or her hand at penning a videogame, and to this we say: Don't quit your day job. The results almost always suck. (Obligatory exception: Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*. But that was 11 years ago.)

UNDERRATED:

QA

It means "quality assurance." These are the folks hired to play a game to death and find all its bugs and weaknesses. Too bad most publishers are usually so anxious to ship the game they can't be bothered to listen.



NEED NOBODY HAS

OVERRATED:

$70 GAMING MOUSE PAD

Fun fact: Most optical mice these days don't even *need* a mouse pad to function properly. Swear to god.

UNDERRATED:

THE EASY CHAIR MOUNT ▲

Tired of loved ones begging you to leave your basement (sorry, "office") and talk to them? The Easy Chair Mount (easychairmount.com), an aluminum stick you bolt to your La-Z-Boy, lets you spend time with the family while continuing to ignore them!

CRAZY MIKE'S DEEP DISCOUNT BIN

BULLET-TIME-ISH FEATURE

OVERRATED: ***SIN*'S "MUTATO-TIME"**
UNDERRATED: **TEQUILA TIME FROM JOHN WOO'S *STRANGLEHOLD***

COPY PROTECTION

OVERRATED: **STARFORCE**
UNDERRATED: **STARDOCK'S LACK OF**

GRAPHICAL EFFECT

OVERRATED: **NORMAL MAPPING**
UNDERRATED: **LIFELIKE ANIMATION**

AUDIO

OVERRATED: **5.1 SURROUND SOUND**
UNDERRATED: **COMMENTARY TRACKS**

FPS MULTIPLAYER MODE

OVERRATED: **CONQUEST**
UNDERRATED: **CO-OP**



DIFFICULTY

OVERRATED: **HARD MODE**
UNDERRATED: **EASY MODE**

WASD

OVERRATED: **JUMP**
UNDERRATED: **DUCK**

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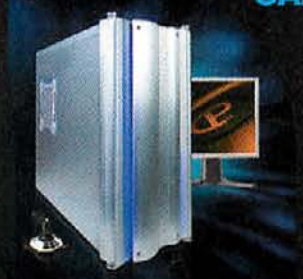
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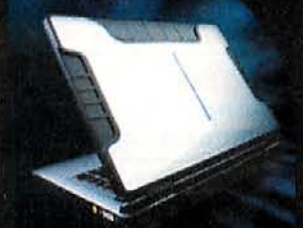
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ALIVE AGAIN!
If you haven't seen it already, check out Steve Purcell's ongoing Sam & Max web comic at www.telltalegames.com.



PHOTOS BY MAXDOLBERG.COM

Based on the **amazing true story** "Sam & Max Return to PC Screens After 13 Years and Two Canceled Games"

THE DAMNED

PUBLISHER: **GameTap/Telltale Games**
DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games**
GENRE: **Adventure**
RELEASE DATE: **October 2006**

SAM & MAX: FREELANCE POLICE

IN THE MINDS OF MANY OLD-SCHOOL ADVENTURE-GAME FANS, THOSE FIVE WORDS conjure some of the strangest and most hilarious gaming memories ever: exploding robot scientists, power-mad country-western stars, celebrity vegetable museums, Jesse James' severed hand, and—who could forget?—the World's Largest Ball of Twine. We speak, of course, of LucasArts' *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, which brought cartoonist Steve Purcell's cult dog-and-bunny-detective comic to the PC way back in ye olde 256-color days of 1993, translating the title characters' offbeat sense of humor into one of the most revered PC point-and-click adventures ever created.

In the years following, the *Sam & Max* faithful clamored for a sequel—and suffered through two false starts (most recently, LucasArts' aborted *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*, axed in March 2004). Then, late last year, something amazing happened: Small-fry startup Telltale Games (cofounded by LucasArts alumni Dan Connors, Kevin Bruner, and Troy Molander) picked up the pieces and announced that an episodic series of *Sam & Max* adventures would hit digital-distribution channels in 2006.

And by "episodic," we don't mean any of that wait-six-months-for-the-next-one nonsense that Valve Software's peddling with *Half-Life 2*. Telltale's ambitious plan: a new *Sam & Max* adventure every month...and even more new *Sam & Max* content *every week*. Before we look at where *Sam & Max* is headed, let's see where they've been—and bring the uninitiated (and thoroughly confused) up to speed.

Time to hit the road!>

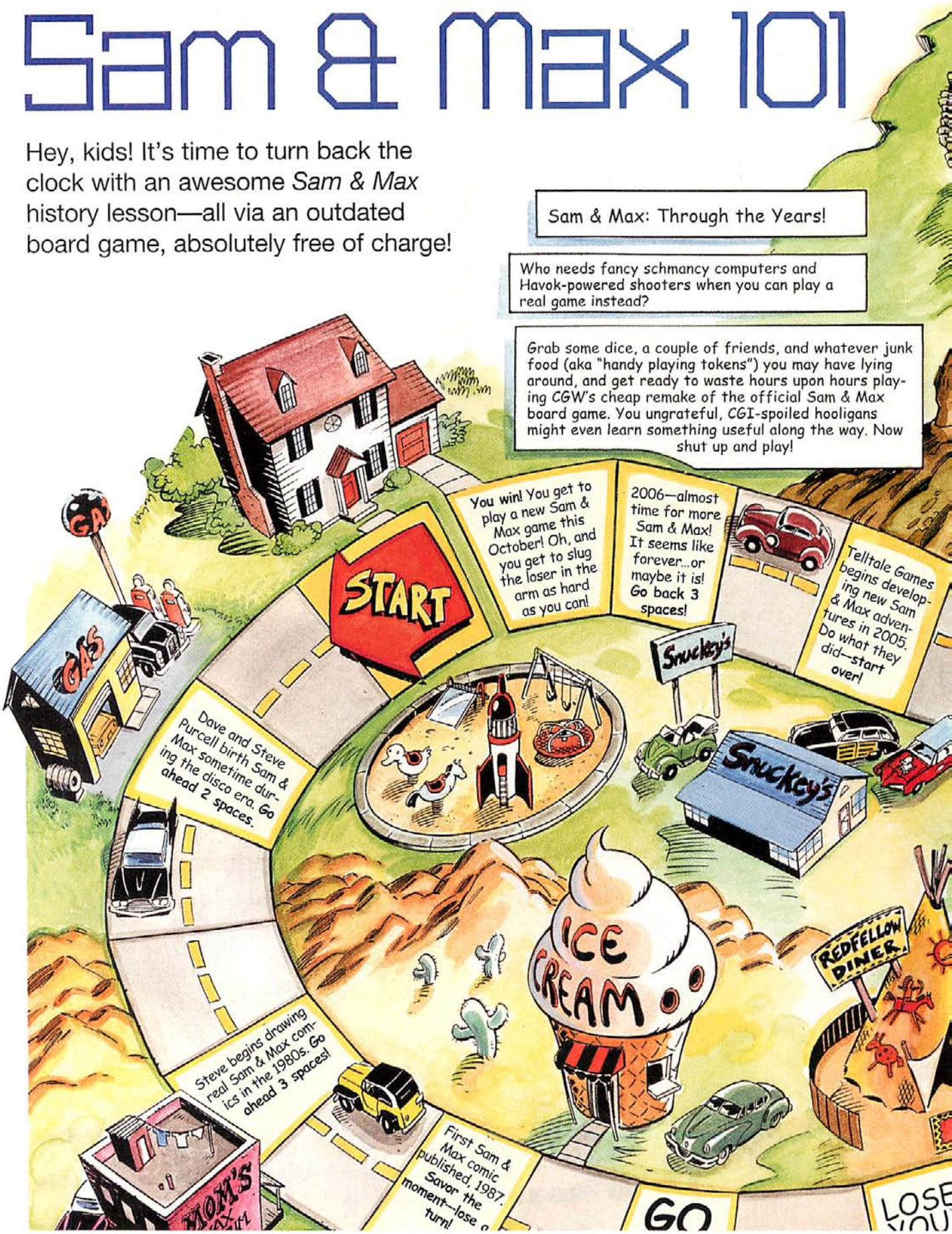


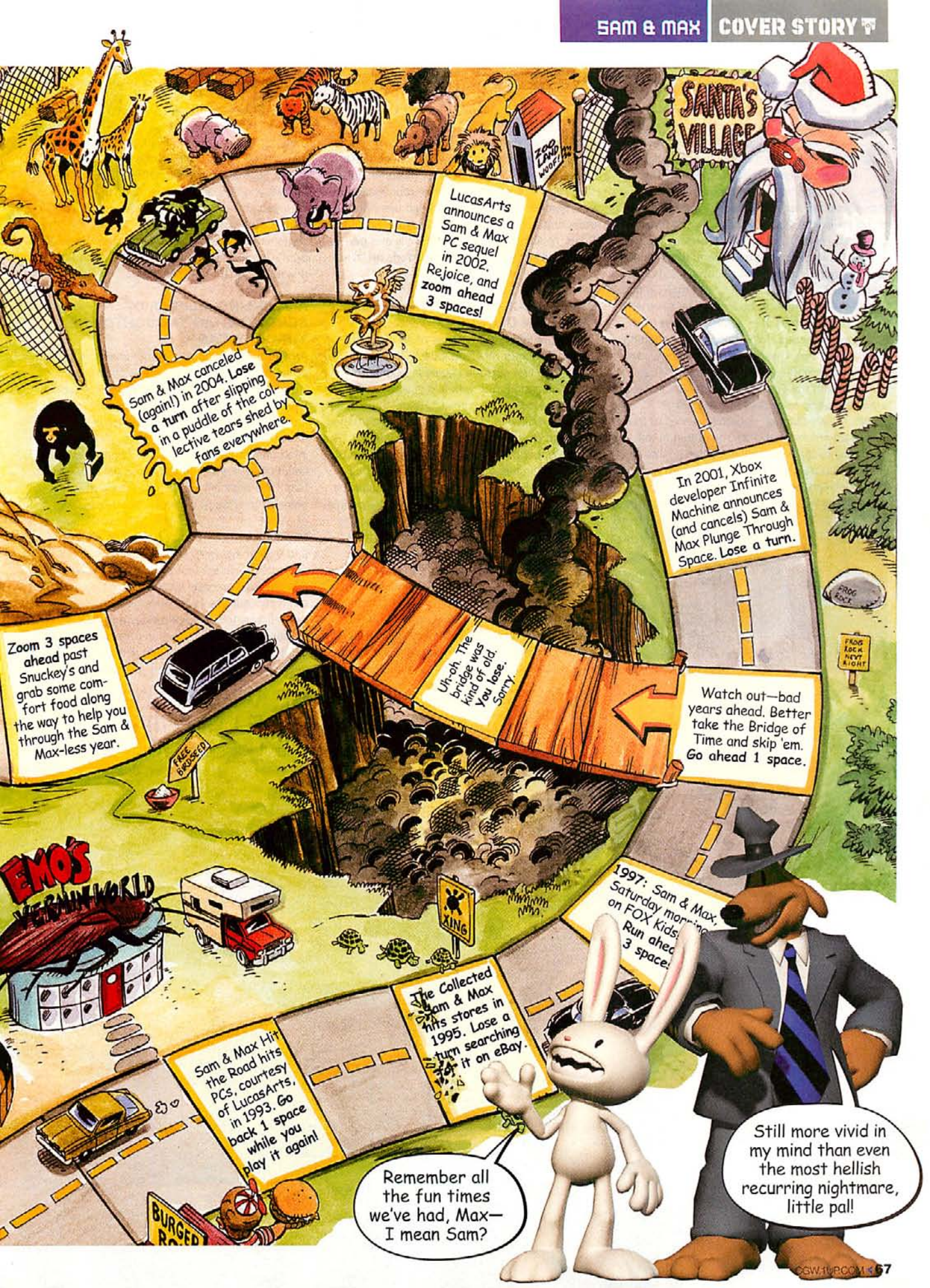
BY RYAN SCOTT

FINALLY DANCE

Sam & Max 101

Hey, kids! It's time to turn back the clock with an awesome *Sam & Max* history lesson—all via an outdated board game, absolutely free of charge!

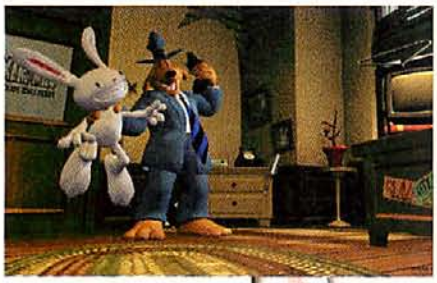



SANTA'S VILLAGE
ZOO LAND WOOF!
LucasArts announces a Sam & Max PC sequel in 2002. Rejoice, and zoom ahead 3 spaces!
Sam & Max canceled (again!) in 2004. Lose a turn after slipping in a puddle of the collective tears shed by fans everywhere.
In 2001, Xbox developer Infinite Machine announces (and cancels) Sam & Max Plunge Through Space. Lose a turn.
FROG ROCK
FROG ROCK NEXT RIGHT
Zoom 3 spaces ahead past Snuckey's and grab some comfort food along the way to help you through the Sam & Max-less year.
Uh-oh. The bridge was kind of old. You lose. Sorry.
Watch out—bad years ahead. Better take the Bridge of Time and skip 'em. Go ahead 1 space.
FREE BRUSSELS
EMO'S
XING
1997: Sam & Max, Saturday morning on FOX Kids! Run ahead 3 spaces!
The Collected Sam & Max hits stores in 1995. Lose a turn searching for it on eBay.
Sam & Max Hit the Road hits PCs, courtesy of LucasArts, in 1993. Go back 1 space while you play it again!
BURGER
Remember all the fun times we've had, Max—I mean Sam?
Still more vivid in my mind than even the most hellish recurring nightmare, little pal!

In the Hot Seat with Telltale Games

Deep in the bowels of Telltale Games' office, surrounded by loony concept drawings and classic comic art, *Sam & Max* creator—or, should we say, "cocreator"—Steve Purcell takes a moment to discuss the genesis of the Freelance Police with us. "My kid brother Dave and I used to draw comic books," he says. "He had invented these two characters named Sam and Max—a dog and a rabbit. He'd draw these really ambitious comics, and then I'd find them lying around after he lost interest in them and finish them myself in a sort of parody. I'd have the characters doing things like forgetting their own names, making fun of how they were drawn, and killing each other...stuff like that. I came up with the Freelance Police thing later as a way to justify what Sam and Max do."

With Telltale Games' upcoming series of *Sam & Max* adventures—and we mean that in the point-and-click, traditional adventure-game sense—Purcell and the rest of the team plan to take players on oddball journey that taps into the style of the original comics. "The comics are kinda grimmer than what's been done in past games," explains senior designer Dave "*Day of the Tentacle*" Grossman, contrasting the new games' more comic-book-ish feel with the comparatively lighter tone of *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. "A little more dirt on the walls and garbage in the street, so to speak," adds art director David Bogan.



SAM & MAX VS. THE EVIL COREY FELDMAN CLONES

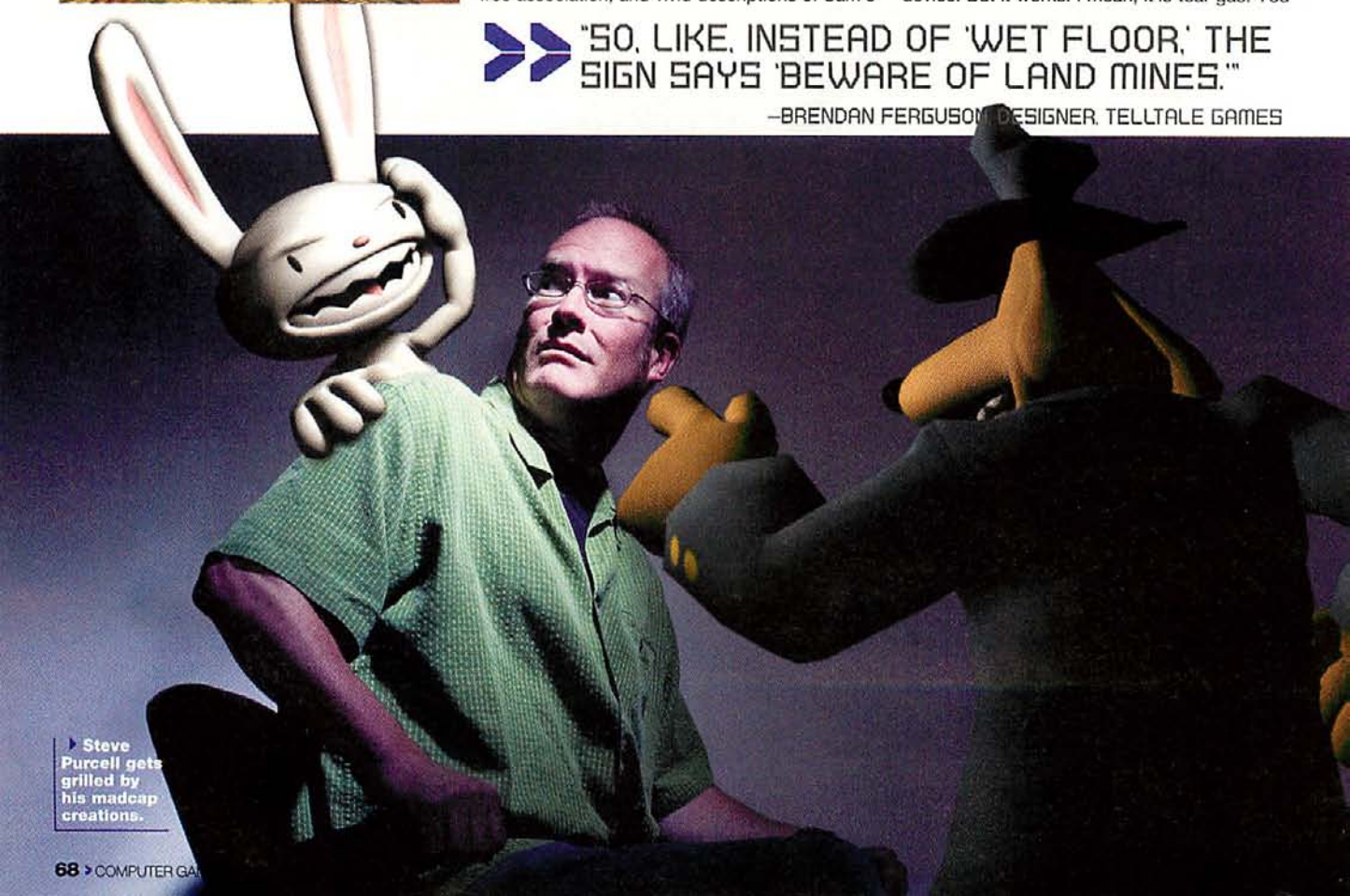
The plot unfolds over a series of six short episodes. "We start off kinda local," Grossman says. "The first episode begins in Sam and Max's neighborhood, with felons who are committing various small crimes." He gestures at an illustration of what looks like a trio of disgruntled fast-food employees; the drawing is labeled "The Soda Poppers." "It turns out they're a group of former child stars gone awry, in the way that child stars always go awry. And so you start by dealing with them and learning about the people in the neighborhood. Each guy's got a specific thing going on, which ties in with the puzzles."

Mum's the word on specific puzzle content—after all, the team doesn't want to spoil any of the fun. But one early dilemma involves a group of rats holding Sam and Max's telephone for ransom. In another, says Grossman, "You get to lie to a therapist and feign 'artificial-personality disorder,' which involves inkblot tests, free association, and vivid descriptions of Sam's dreams. You also get to bonk several people over the head, which is always fun." As in *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, you control Sam, while Max follows you and occasionally acts as a means to help you solve puzzles. "Max can have a variety of uses, but you'll never control him directly," designer Brendan Ferguson explains. "Basically, Sam's in charge of the investigation, and Max is this non-sequitur force of chaos."

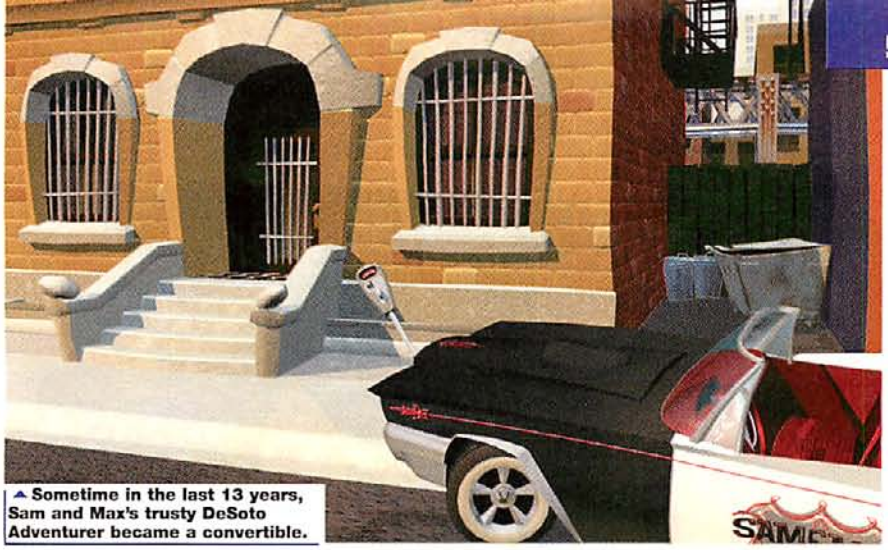
A SWIRLING MIASMA OF SCINTILLATING THOUGHTS AND TURGID IDEAS

Any *Sam & Max* fan recognizes chaos as one of the recurring themes in these characters' world, and the new game's environments convey this central concept. Take, for example, the Inconvenience Store: "The storekeeper, Bosco, is very paranoid," Ferguson grins. "He's totally into conspiracies. He keeps getting robbed...so he's built this amazing advanced defense system. He's basically made it as inconvenient as possible to shop at his store. So, like, instead of 'Wet Floor,' the sign says 'Beware of Land Mines.' And he's got cameras in the freezers and everything. He's always offering you these great deals—in the first episode, he makes this tear-gas grenade launcher that's actually a salad shooter filled with tiny onions. He's selling these things for exorbitant rates and making all of these crazy demands of you, and once you get it, you realize that it's just this piece-of-junk device. But it works. I mean, it *is* tear gas. You

> "SO, LIKE, INSTEAD OF 'WET FLOOR,' THE SIGN SAYS 'BEWARE OF LAND MINES.'"
>
> —BRENDAN FERGUSON, DESIGNER, TELLTALE GAMES



Steve Purcell gets grilled by his madcap creations.



▲ Sometime in the last 13 years, Sam and Max's trusty DeSoto Adventurer became a convertible.

go around making everybody cry. That's what Sam and Max want to do, anyway."

One thing that Purcell *doesn't* want to do with the new games is tread old ground—so don't expect to see adaptations of any old *Sam & Max* comics. "Sometimes it's preferable just to build the story around the parameters of the medium instead of trying to make one thing into another," says Purcell. "I think Sam and Max provide enough opportunity for stories that it's not entirely necessary to go back and adapt the existing material. *Hit the Road* is a good example, I think, of a story that has all the flavor of one of the comics, *Sam & Max on the Road*, without being a direct adaptation."

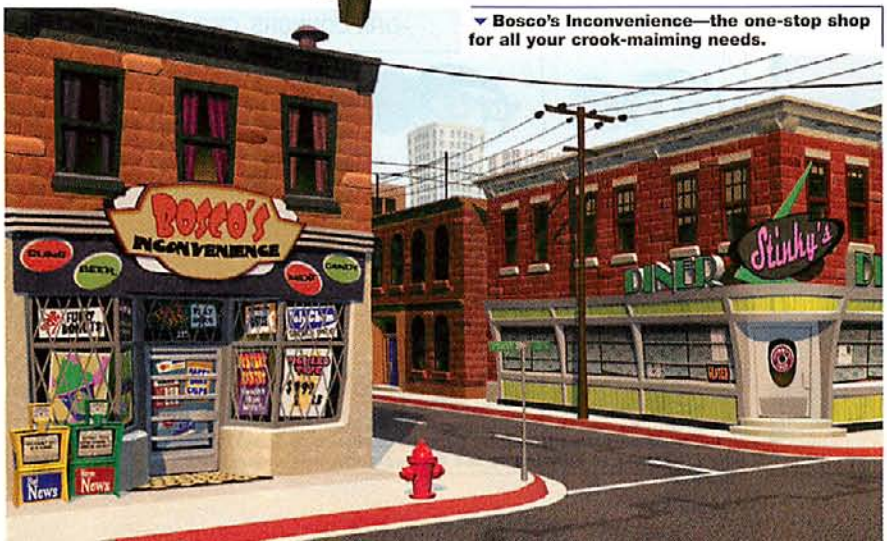
"Our design goal," says Ferguson, "is to make you feel like you are these crazy Freelance Police officers, and you can just be involved in all this sort of mayhem. So we do still want to keep that classic sense of figuring out clever ways to do things, but we also want to let you go around shooting up the place, get in your car and drive like a maniac, and pummel and subdue some perpetrators."›





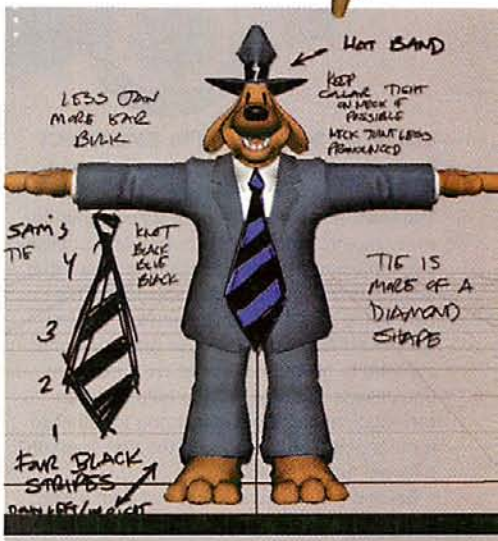


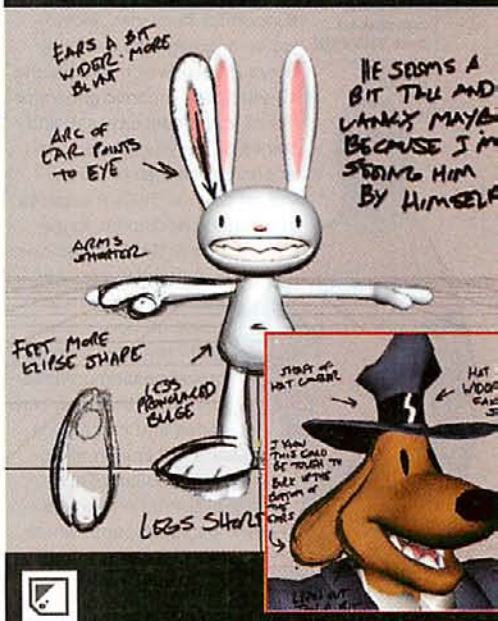




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BACK AND FORTH

Designing the Freelance Police

"Steve's involved in the [design] process a lot," says art director David Bogan. "He's always drawing for me, which is great. Right up until a model's done—and even after a model's done—he's always sending me little tweaks to fix, which drives us nuts sometimes. But we love it. That's how involved he is. Since we're doing the episodic approach, we have a pretty small cast of characters, some of which will be reused in other episodes. So Steve feels closer to those characters, and he wants to get into them and make sure they're looking good and they're interesting."



Our boys do a bit of Highway Surfin' after a hard day's work.

LOOK AT ME, SAM, I'M EPISODIC!

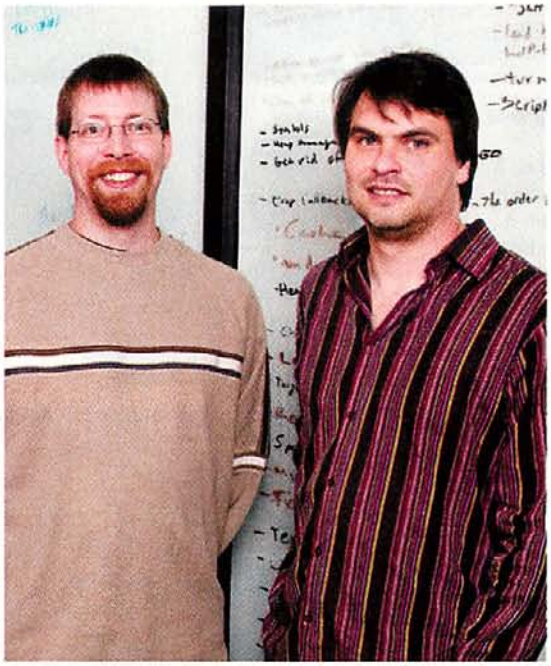
The most remarkable thing about Sam and Max's reincarnation is Telltale's ambition: The team plans on rolling out a new episode every month, starting in October, and publishing additional weekly machinima content that advances the plot between episodes. "It's part of the strategy," says Telltale CEO Dan Connors. "We're going to use [the additional content] to fill in the story as we jump from one case to the next, and to help build up the anticipation." Episodes string together to form ongoing plot arcs, with the first "season" planned for six episodes.

Beyond the inaugural season of *Sam & Max*, Telltale offers plenty o' other support for the series, including an ongoing web comic by Steve Purcell (which bridges the 13-year gap), a comic generator (for all you creative types), and stacks of T-shirts, posters, and other shameless merchandise.



Bosco, convinced that THEY'RE all out to get him.

And, of course, Telltale expects to produce additional, longer seasons (if the first one does well, naturally—and with breaks in between to develop new stories), with the possibility of boxed season compilations down the road. New episodes and machinima teasers will launch exclusively on the GameTap game-subscription service (www.gametap.com), which currently charges a monthly $10 fee for on-demand access to a whole lotta current and classic PC and console games.



The brains of the operation: Telltale Games CTO Kevin Bruner and CEO Dan Connors, along with a water cooler... er, fish tank...er, water cooler...oh, we give up.

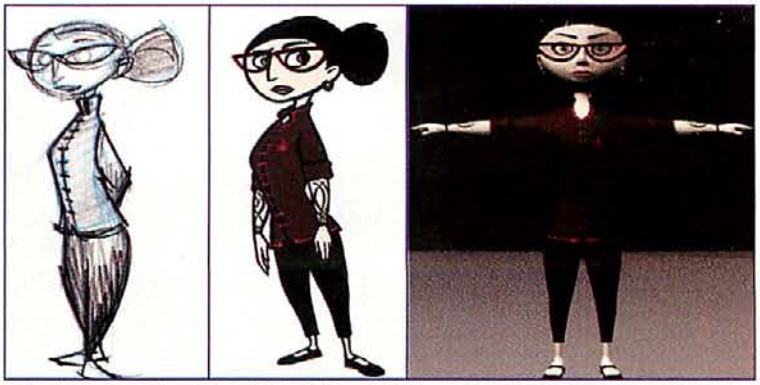


Hmmm...10 bucks for a new *Sam & Max* adventure each month, rife with zany humor and off-the-wall situations from Steve Purcell and company? We weep tears of joy at the very prospect of watching our favorite canine shamus and hyperkinetic rabbity thing punish more dastardly evildoers in whatever ways they can think of.

> "WE'RE GOING TO USE [THE ADDITIONAL CONTENT] TO FILL IN THE STORY AS WE JUMP FROM ONE CASE TO THE NEXT."
>
> –DAN CONNORS, CEO, TELLTALE GAMES



Sam & Max mastermind Steve Purcell lays it all out for us.



Look for part-time therapist Sybil to exhibit a seriously short attention span when it comes to careers. In the first episode, she moonlights as a tattoo artist.



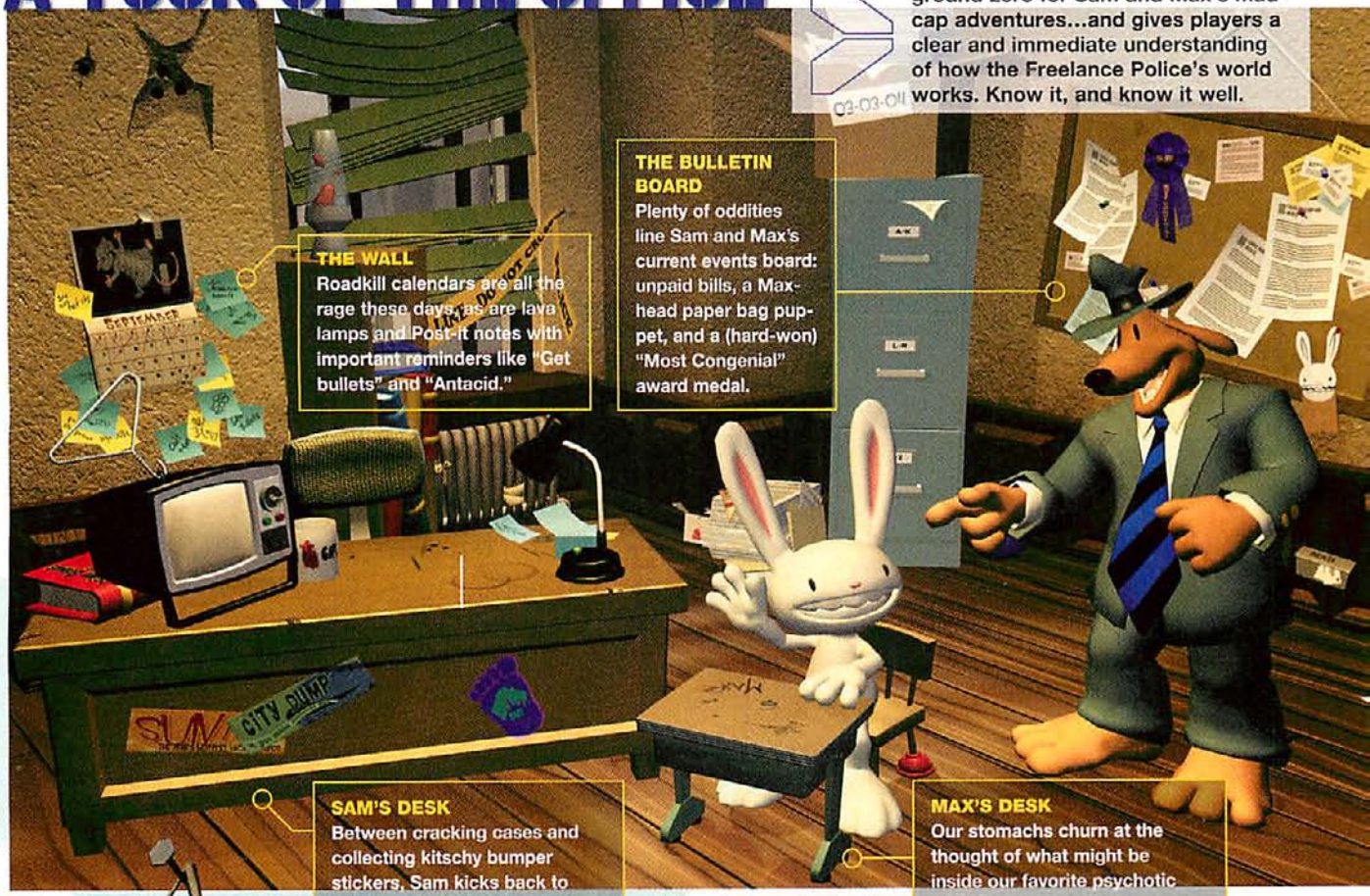
THROW US A FREAKIN' BONE!



Don't forget about Telltale Games' other episodic series, *Bone* (based on Jeff Smith's award-winning comic series). The first two episodes (including the recently released *Bone: The Great Cow Race*) are available from telltalegames.com, with the next chapter, *Bone: Eyes of the Storm*, coming later this year.

A TOUR OF THE OFFICE

This dingy New York office serves as ground zero for Sam and Max's madcap adventures...and gives players a clear and immediate understanding of how the Freelance Police's world works. Know it, and know it well.



THE WALL
Roadkill calendars are all the rage these days, as are lava lamps and Post-it notes with important reminders like "Get bullets" and "Antacid."

THE BULLETIN BOARD
Plenty of oddities line Sam and Max's current events board: unpaid bills, a Max-head paper bag puppet, and a (hard-won) "Most Congenial" award medal.

SAM'S DESK
Between cracking cases and collecting kitschy bumper stickers, Sam kicks back to catch *Flintstones* reruns on his awesomely outdated TV. Not that anything's wrong with that.

MAX'S DESK
Our stomachs churn at the thought of what might be inside our favorite psychotic lagomorph's desk. If you look closely, you can probably see some teeth marks.





WATCH OUR EXCLUSIVE VIDEO TOUR ONLINE!

Head over to cgw.1UP.com for an exclusive video tour of Telltale Games' office, as well as video interviews with Telltale CEO Dan Connors, art director David Bogan, and other people with big, important titles.


"CRIME IS AN INVITATION TO THE CRYPT!"
–STEVE PURCELL, SAM & MAX WRITER/ARTIST
(CHANNELING EVERYONE'S FAVORITE CANINE SHAMUS)

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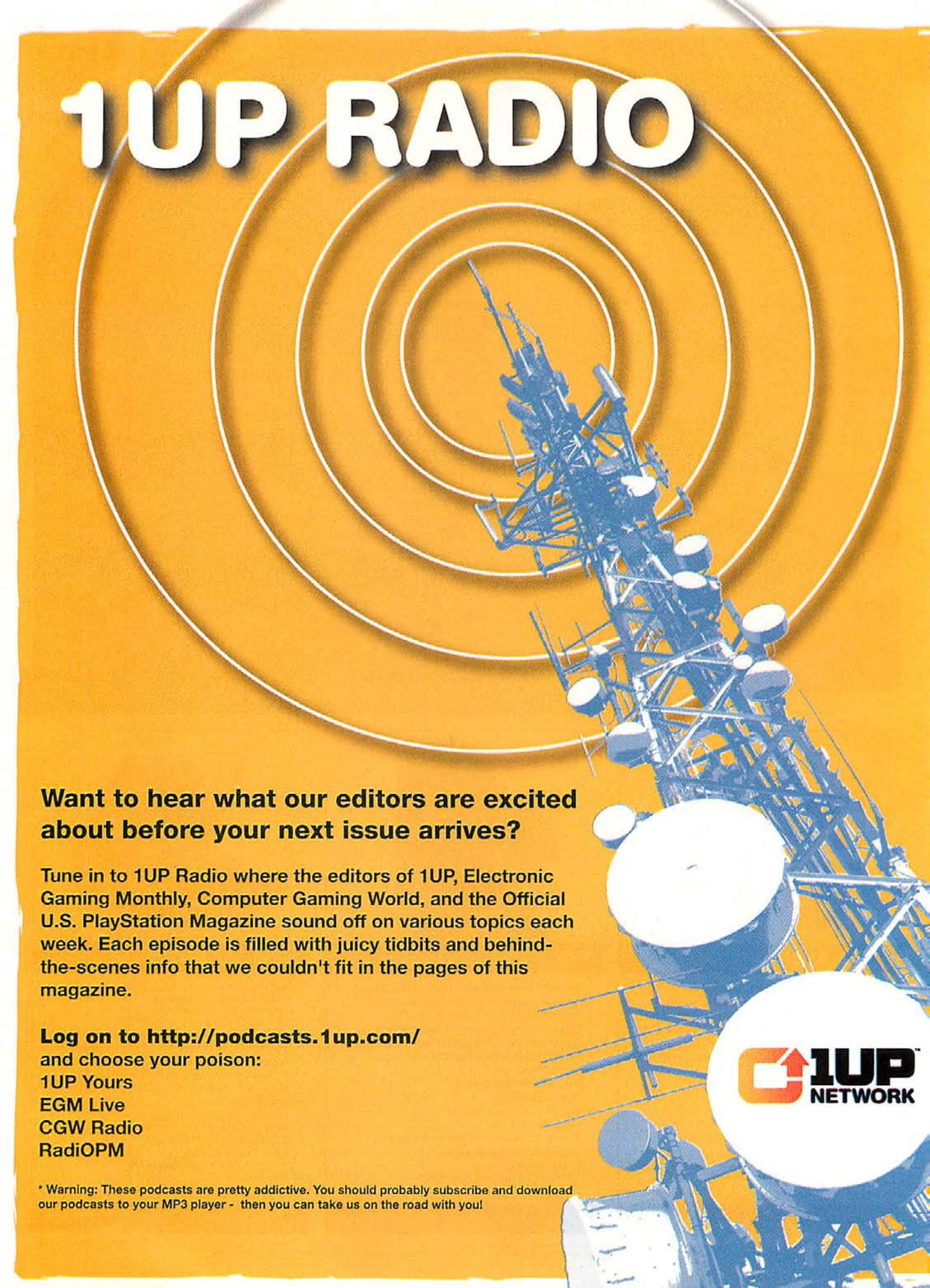
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1UP RADIO



Want to hear what our editors are excited about before your next issue arrives?

Tune in to 1UP Radio where the editors of 1UP, Electronic Gaming Monthly, Computer Gaming World, and the Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine sound off on various topics each week. Each episode is filled with juicy tidbits and behind-the-scenes info that we couldn't fit in the pages of this magazine.

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1UP NETWORK

VIEWPOINT

BEYOND REVIEWS

ISSUE 265

READ THIS FIRST! THE CGW REVIEWS SECTION IS NO MORE. HERE'S HOW **VIEWPOINT** IS DIFFERENT:

NO MORE REVIEWS

Mindful of the lateness of magazine reviews, we don't print our reviews in the magazine anymore. Instead, we publish our reviews online the day the games come out—you can find them online at **http://cgw.1up.com**

MULTIPLE SCORES

Yes, we still have scores! We give every game a score when we first review it online (just look for the 1UP Network score—that's us!). We also list the scores that other websites and outlets gave each game, for additional perspective and points of comparison.

BROADER ANALYSIS

These articles are meant to give you the "bigger picture": a summary of our original online review, community and media reaction to the game, and a look at patches and updates since a game's original release. In short: It's everything you need to know.



THIS IS NOT A REVIEWS SECTION

The astute among you have probably noticed a bit of tinkering going on with the Viewpoint section over the past couple of issues—namely, the addition of a "Reality Check" box on each featured game noting review scores given to the product in question by major gaming opinion sites.

For those of you who want scores, that's what the 1UP Network number exists for. 1UP's PC reviews—all scribed by the very same snappy writers whose witticisms you're about to read—form the baseline for what you see in this section each month. We include those other guys' scores as a frame of reference for readers curious about some of the other points of view we occasionally refer to—a shocking inclusion for a section called "Viewpoint," we know.

OK, so the headline on this page isn't completely true—but we don't want you to look at Viewpoint as the typical reviews section that you see in every other magazine (hence the name change). Yes, you can find opinions on games now available in stores. Yes, we attempt to provide relatively timely coverage of games you might be interested in playing. Beyond that, we go a cut above the norm in our content thanks to all the elements spelled out in the handy FAQ below. Embrace the change—we definitely have.

EDITOR'S CHOICE AWARD

CGW's reviews don't concern themselves with scored evaluations; you can find those at 1UP.com well before the magazine arrives. Our Editor's Choice emblem signifies the best in PC gaming.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT VIEWPOINT

So do you still review games?
YES! The *CGW* team posts its reviews online as the games hit store shelves. Read them at cgw.1UP.com.

What's 1UP.com?
Computer Gaming World is just one part of the larger 1UP Network (www.1UP.com). Visit us there at cgw.1UP.com.

How do I know if I should buy the game?
Read the Viewpoint article and check the scores in the box to see what we originally scored the game and how others rated it.

If you still can't decide, read our in-depth review online at **cgw.1UP.com**.



INSIDE



Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends
Fantasy meets technology.



Half-Life 2: Episode One
Gravity guns meet episodic gaming.



Guild Wars Factions
Swords meet soon-to-be-severed heads.

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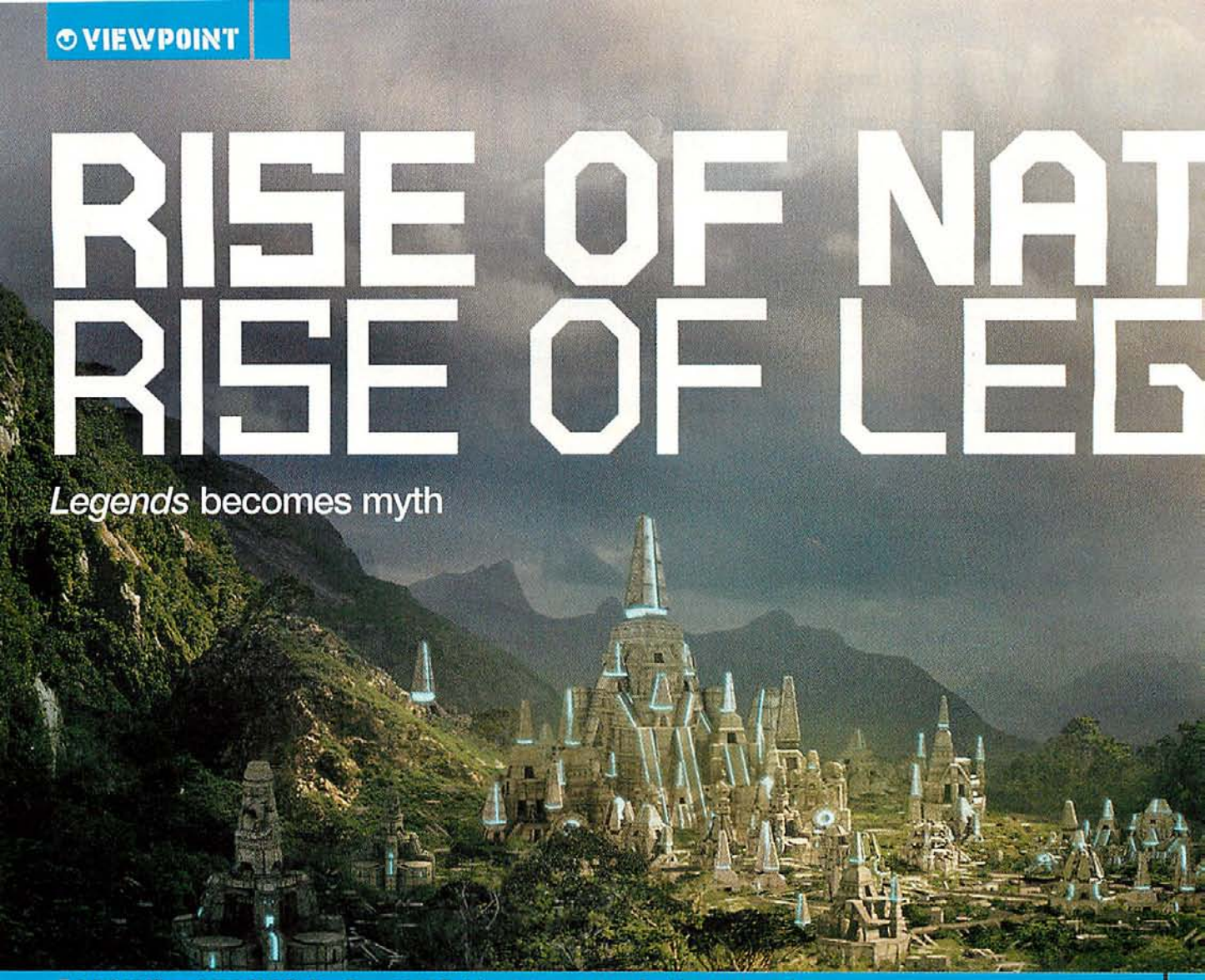
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RISE OF NAT
RISE OF LEG

Legends becomes myth



PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Big Huge Games** GENRE: **Real-time strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
REQUIRED: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players**

EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

RTS GAMES DON'T OFTEN INCITE revolutions—they make small advances and occasional retreats, and they usually wind up safely treading in territory others conquered long, long ago. This is a genre whose last great upheaval came when *StarCraft* decided its three factions would offer *somewhat different* gameplay mechanics. And that was what, eight years ago?

That's why I don't much cotton to GameSpot's review of *Rise of Legends*, which says that "this wacky mishmash of real history, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and *Chariots of the Gods* is damn hard to warm up to. Each of the civilizations is so offbeat that there are no reference points, no similarities to RTS conventions that you can latch onto and use to dip a toe into the weirdness." But that's the beauty of it, really. Familiarity breeds contempt—and in a genre glutted with Terran clone troopers and musket-wielding French revolutionaries, even the choking steam clouds produced by *ROL*'s most "boring" faction feel like gusts of fresh air.

EDISONADE AND MOCTEZUMA

And we say "boring" with the utmost reverence: The Italian-flavored, Jules Verne-ian Vinci family's clockwork men, wobbly flying contraptions, and ponderous juggernauts provide the game's most obvious link to RTS convention. They're by no means conventional…just easier to relate to than the pseudo-Arabian, pseudo-mystical Alin (desert dwellers who deal in sand, fire, and—by bizarrely logical extension—glass) or the Mexi-cosmic Cuotl with their death spheres, Cities of Vengeance, and Aztec *Power Ranger* space-animal-robot gods. The units and structures straddle the line between cartoonish and exquisitely detailed, and it's simple to tell at a glance (and from the icons at the bottom of the screen) which units are which; if you possess the visual and mental bandwidth to watch them work, they're all entertaining in their own right.

So does a wealth of creative riches make *ROL* the greatest RTS since *StarCraft*? Not quite. While the game's art-direction coup certainly merits celebration, the gameplay itself remains firmly entrenched in the genre's time-tested tactics: expand your base, collect resources (though you get mercilessly little of that here—just Timonium crystals and wealth or energy, depending upon your faction choice), upgrade units to build bigger and better armies until you can roll over your enemy. And while the three sides each have different nuances when it comes to healing, attrition, and resource gathering—you can build the Alin's unit-producing Sand Circles even outside your own territory, for example, while the Cuotl's Fanes can lift themselves off the ground and transport units across chasms—they all build upon the same RTS foundation. The

» EVEN THE CHOKING STEAM CLOUDS PRODUCED BY *RISE OF LEGENDS*' MOST "BORING" FACTION FEEL LIKE GUSTS OF FRESH AIR.

IONS: ENDS



trade-off for far-flung gameplay differences: The sides all seem perfectly harmonized; while you'll need to adjust your tactics and build-order decisions (see sidebar), no faction feels over- or underpowered.

THE TOWER OF INTERFACE

ROL's other great achievement is its ultrarefined and superstreamlined interface, which honestly tries to work with you rather than against you. In almost every potentially messy instance, the game seems to intuit your intent—no need to worry about accidentally loading confused miners or passing trade ships into your army transport's cargo bay for frontline deployment. And when you don't have time for interfacial details, you can trust *ROL* to take care of them for you, allowing you the free mindshare necessary to learn the game's tangled hotkey web, which lets you do everything from the usual Control-key grouping to finding the city where it's cheapest to purchase military districts. And, as GamesRadar warns, "the guy with the steel-trap memory and piano fingers will smoke your mouse pokes every time." The campaign, fun as it is, makes a poor preparation regimen for field duty. No matter how well you fare against the A.I. (which favors waves of easily conquered miniarmies), casual contact with autistic strangers online only leads to despair.

If you do decide to brave the online world, *ROL* offers a robust and simple matchmaking service, with a Quick Battle option and a three-pronged "level" structure that tries to match you with equally skilled opponents. Early reviews complained of multiplayer connection issues—mostly midgame drops—but developer Big Huge Games has since issued several patches (v1.5 as of this writing) addressing some of the problems. We haven't yet run into any postpatch issues (though whether that's due to a patch that fixed everything or sheer dumb luck is difficult to tell), but it would be a shame if these early technical problems already meant premature death for *ROL*'s online lifespan: A month after release, multiplayer isn't particularly lively—you can end up waiting several minutes for Quick Battles, and we only found three or four custom games available whenever we looked at the list. Our advice: If you're interested in more than just the campaign mode, make sure you have some like-minded friends.

RISKY BUSINESS

Of course, just sticking with the campaign mode is another option. Like the original *Rise of Nations* campaign, *ROL* employs a board game–style strategic map that lets you pick and choose which battle to take on next, adding a smart, simple strategic layer that doesn't divert attention from the RTS core. Enemy heroes wander the map, too, dividing and conquering on their own—but *ROL* smartly avoids the drag of making you reconquer lost territory, instead letting you purchase autodefending military districts to buttress your former conquests. Each territory, once claimed, offers specific tactical advantages (from more skill points to special powers you can summon during emergencies), and you earn various skill, army, and invention points from districts you build in already-conquered areas.

IGN lauds the campaign's "nice range of mission types…some are just straight-up slugfests between you and whoever happens to own the territory. Others require you to defend against a siege, or free people from a massive prison, or chase down and kill a genie who's got something you need. In nearly every ›

VIEWPOINT



▲ The Cuotl can build only one self-healing City of Vengeance at a time. It comes at a high cost, but the reign of terror it brings is well worth it.



mission, there'll be hidden objectives that you can uncover and undertake, but the only rewards for doing so are the pride you feel knowing that you did something that you technically could have skipped." Unfortunately, the mission variety really only holds true for the superior first two legs (Vinci and Alin) of the campaign; by the time you get behind the reins of the Cuotl, the story's lost its steam. It's like the designers ran out of objective ideas. "Eh, just conquer all the cities on the map, then. Whatever." Halfway through the Cuotl arc, we found ourselves cranking the game speed (which could use a tick mark or two between medium fast and supercrazy fast) just to get plow through to the (very loosely resolved) end.

Late-campaign lack of inspiration aside, *ROL* provides an exquisite example of real-time-strategy design gone right, from its unique art direction to its evolutionary, astoundingly unannoying interface to its perfectly executed three-party balancing act. Pay no mind to the naysayers who list *ROL* as a gimmick that soon wears out its welcome—most RTS games wish they had a gimmick this good. **/Sean Molloy**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Creativity and smart streamlining result in one of the most interesting and memorable "traditional" RTS games in a while.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	9/10
GAMESPOT	7.6/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	8.2/10

BIRD-SNAKE

The Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, whose name is a combination of the words "bird" and "snake," did not level up, shoot lasers, or derive power from nuclear reactors. We think.

RACIAL HARMONY

While *Rise of Legends*' three factions are all rooted in the same basic gameplay mechanics, each side has its own tricks and strategic nuances.

VINCI



Don't underestimate the Vinci family's array of gadgets, from the handy spying telescope to the myriad prototypes you can produce as you expand and grow. The Vinci also have a handy building that can convert Timonium to wealth and vice versa—invaluable when you're saddled with a resource imbalance. Alpha male Giacamo's healing ability and incredible supershield (once leveled up) make him one of the finest heroes in the game. Oh, and it's incredibly fun to run over hordes of enemy infantry with a juggernaut.

ALIN



The Alin's ability to place unit-summoning Sand, Fire, and Glass Circles anywhere on the map—not just in friendly territory—makes them deadly frontline combatants and, by extension, the closest thing to good "rushers" in the game (which may explain their popularity online). It's easy for the Alin to accrue an abundance of late-game wealth, so make sure to upgrade your potent wealth-reliant Afreet units to the absolute max...and get used to seeing swarms of roving djinn hurl deadly fireballs.

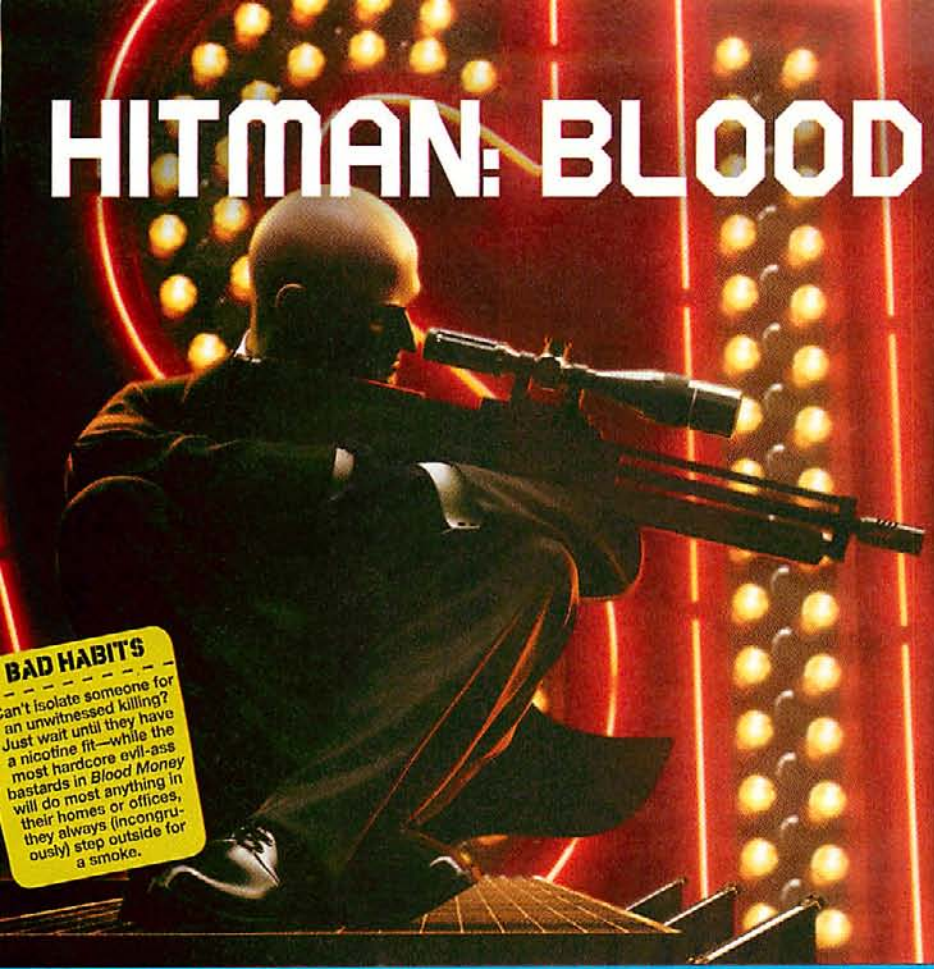
CUOTL



The Cuotl produce energy through reactor districts attached to their cities. Energy production correlates to the number of sites you own, so conquering even small outposts helps. Unfortunately, it's easy to end up with an energy deficit early on (it starts off accruing at a crawl). The Cuotl's Holy Arks are the game's most potent supply units, as they prevent attrition in enemy territory, provide healing, and greatly bolster the efficiency of linked structures. Oh, and the City of Vengeance is one of the coolest units in any RTS ever.

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

The deadliest game



BAD HABITS

Can't isolate someone for an unwitnessed killing? Just wait until they have a nicotine fit—while the most hardcore evil-ass bastards in *Blood Money* will do most anything in their homes or offices, they always (incongruously) step outside for a smoke.



▲ Behold—the most badass clown ever.



▲ It's my party, and you'll die if I want (you) to.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **IO Interactive** GENRE: **Murder simulator** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box, download (direct2drive.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
REQUIRED: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, DVD-ROM drive** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

WHILE MY INTRINSICALLY ANTI-social nature makes me the ideal audience for a lone-wolf-assassin sim like *Hitman: Blood Money*, it doesn't make me the sort of guy who rushes online to see what other gamers are thinking. But I make an exception with *Blood Money*, because I so love comparing homicide notes with other players, contrasting the quality and manner of my kills in *Blood Money* to those my fellow murder-monkeys have made. And what I've learned is this: Some truly twisted bastards play this game.

EIGHT MILLION WAYS TO DIE

That gamers are able to have such a lively discussion on death-dealing is a testament to the great level design in *Blood Money*. Every level handily accommodates different solutions. If you want to snipe, you'll be able to find an opportunity. Want to indulge in the franchise's new feature of arranging "accidents"? No problem—you can always find something to rig or a prop gun to replace with a real, loaded one. Maybe you'd rather just get hip-deep in corpses—find a nice little bottleneck, load up on ammo, and start mowing down those wedding guests, because anyone that'd wear a trucker hat to a wedding has got it coming. Twice. True, if you want to get the highest postmission rating of Silent Assassin, you'll need to follow a fairly rigid, prescribed "correct solution." But, by and large, the world of this *Hitman* game, from the quiet cul-de-sacs of suburbia to the packed streets of Mardi Gras, is one great big deadly playground—and your brains and lovingly self-customized guns are your toys.

Take the mines, for example. Among the many threads at the *Hitman* message boards over at hitmanforum.com is one simply comparing the varied and many ways you can use remote-controlled mines to put a deadness into people (since just about everyone in the game is some sort of criminal, collateral damage compounded by morality is not that much of an issue). One poster, SuperJer, racked up the carnage by doubling up on the mines in the New Life mission, planting one mine in the food a caterer brought to the front door. According to SuperJer, after the initial explosion, "everyone in the house runs out to see what happened, *and* the two limos show up with eight more FBI guys, *plus* the two from the van. All in all, that's about 20 people on the front porch, where my other mine has been waiting since I casually tossed it there after the first explosion...got the clown, too. Damn clowns." A job well done, indeed...but better than Skeletor, who posted that he took out about 30 evil partygoers by lobbing mines onto a dance floor? Hard to say.

And *Blood Money* has more (a lot more), but you get the idea. As many ways as you can employ mines, you can employ most everything else in your arsenal—as well as found objects, myriad disguises, and simple circumstance—to dispatch your targets. *Blood Money* practically begs you to go back and replay its 13 missions just to see how else you can beat them.

SHOOTING BLANKS

I have just one knock against *Blood Money*, but it's a pretty frustrating one: the save system. The series traditionally limits the number of saves a player can make during a mission, but this time out, you cannot reload midmission saves after ending the game. Terminating any game session means restarting the current scenario from square mother-loving one. Considering how challenging it gets later on to gain simple access to, oh, say, the White House, this can kind of suck the chrome right off your PC case. Other than that, you really can't miss with *Blood Money*. Unless, of course, you leave any witnesses alive. **/Robert Coffey**

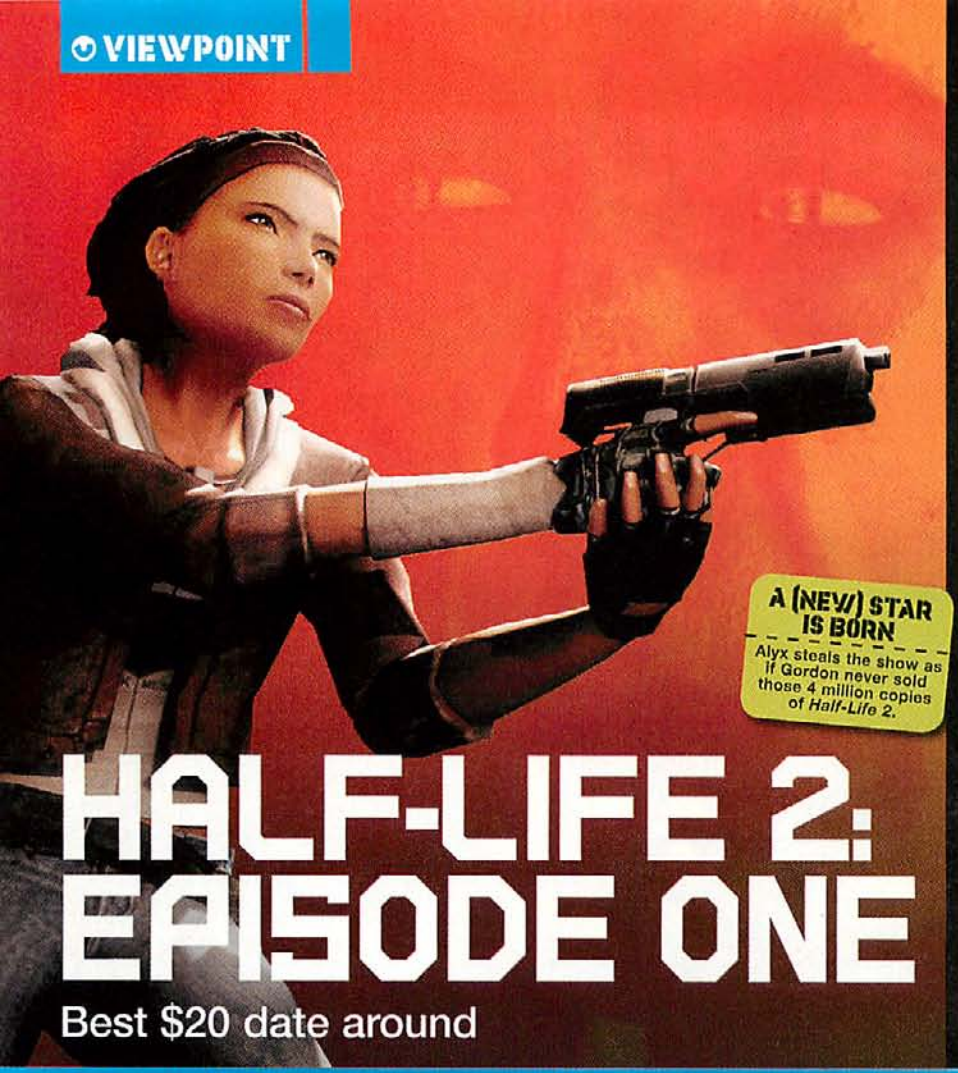
BLOOD MONEY IS A GAME THAT PRACTICALLY BEGS YOU TO GO BACK AND REPLAY ITS 13 MISSIONS.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Killer.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	8.2/10
GAMESPY	—
IGN	8/10



A (NEW) STAR IS BORN
Alyx steals the show as if Gordon never sold those 4 million copies of *Half-Life 2*.

HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE

Best $20 date around



▲ Just exactly who has whom cornered here?



▲ The whole gang's here. Let's play follow-the-Gordon!



▲ Ya gotta love a gal who's comfortable with a big gun.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts/Valve Software** DEVELOPER: **Valve Software** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box, Download (www.steampowered.com)**
ESRB RATING: **Mature** REQUIRED: **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, DirectX 7 capable videocard, Internet connection**
RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, DirectX 9 capable videocard, Half-Life 2** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

THE FIRST EXTENSION OF *HALF-LIFE 2* arrives after much anticipation of what it may hold and an equal dose of hoopla over episodic gaming. As the first in a planned series of three such episodic follow-ups to *HL2*, *Episode One* picks up mere moments after the explosive cliff-hanger conclusion of *HL2*—which makes a lot of sense for a series that's zero-for-two on satisfying endings. Content-wise, *Episode One* delivers the epilogue and wraps things up by following hero-types Alyx Vance and Gordon Freeman as they escape from the chaos they unleashed in the Citadel and, ultimately, City 17.

A couple of recurring concerns surface as you browse the discussion surrounding *Episode One*. The first involves the heavy recycling of content from the original game; while backtracking through a familiar progression of environments in your escape from City 17, you face (mostly) the same set of foes along the way. Aside from a slight twist on the headcrab zombie, most threats consist of the familiar Combine soldiers, manhacks, and ant lions. As IGN reviewer Tom McNamara aptly summarizes, "*Episode One* doesn't feel as fresh as a result, since it largely reuses previous content, and it doesn't advance the story as much as a four-hour experience should."

The game's second stumbling point: It comes to an end far too quickly. Experienced FPS gamers—those who've played *HL2*, for instance—might spend around five hours on their first run. Even for rookies, it's easily accomplished in a weekend sitting; as GameSpot critic Jason Ocampo explains, "Before you know it, you've escaped from City 17, the credits are rolling, and you're left wanting more." But I would go a step further: When I reached the end, I had a sense that I'd basically treaded water to get to the *real* ending of *HL2*...a notion I blame partly on the lack of what IGN's McNamara terms the "wow" factor, a deficit brought about by the combination of short length and reused content.

ALYX TO THE RESCUE

But Alyx Vance steals the spotlight as the star of the show. Solely from a gameplay perspective, her presence at your side through most of the game brings a new teamwork dynamic to working through the otherwise same old environments of City 17. But she's no mechanical drone—excellent voice work (I don't even hold it against her that she blurts out "Oh, snap!" at one point) and naturally animated gestures give her a palpable personality. Your interactions with Alyx account for the most memorable moments in the game, action and all.

Not surprisingly, *HL2*'s Source engine puts on a pretty show with its latest improvements, keeping good visual pace with recent videocard technology. The commentary mode from the *Lost Coast* demo level also returns, giving curious players a fascinating look behind the curtain. I enjoyed the insightful discussion about how much goes into every detail—even those we sail past for but a brief moment during a firefight—but I also felt a little like I was attending an academic lecture. Fans will revel in it, though, as they will in the game itself. It's more *Half-Life*, after all—and that's what really matters. / **Garnett Lee**

I HAD A SENSE THAT I'D BASICALLY TREADED WATER TO GET TO THE REAL ENDING OF *HALF-LIFE 2*.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

With a single smile, Alyx makes up for a somewhat thinly stretched first episode.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	7.8/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	8.2/10

SiN EPISODES: EMERGENCE

Somewhat original *SiN*





▲ Like killer mutants? Throw your hands in the air!



▲ Take careful aim—head shots work best against these guys.

MULTIPLAYER, ANYONE?

We complain about *Emergence*'s lack of multiplayer, but Ritual is aiming to release a multiplayer add-on in August. No mode details yet, but Ritual is "very excited to get it out to the community."

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts/Valve Software** DEVELOPER: **Ritual** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box, download (steampowered.com)**
ESRB RATING: **Mature** REQUIRED: **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.6GB hard drive space, Internet connection**
RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Should be available by August**

ARE GAMES ART? They weren't in *Duke Nukem* and *Doom*'s day. Men were men, women had porn-star proportions, and BFG didn't exactly stand for Bio-Force Gun. Today, developers slow down the pace to flaunt graphics while wrangling with bigger questions like emotion and storytelling. Hence, *SiN Episodes: Emergence* has an especially tough fight: The born-again FPS needs to stay true to its roots and remain palatable enough to attract new gamers...while packing enough gameplay into the first six-hour episode to justify the $20 cost.

Like a schizophrenic off meds, *Emergence* begins unbalanced. Two early cringe-inducing scenes feature villainous sexpot Elexis Sinclaire's digitized boobs practically slapping you in the face; from there, it shifts to a drugged-up Col. John R. Blade silently brooding through the entire experience like *Half-Life*'s Gordon Freeman. Isn't there some sort of middle ground here? Half the fun of the original game came from hearing Blade crack wise while calling shots for the HardCorps team. Now, his handlers simply bark exposition-laced orders: "Go in the building, John! You need to turn off the computer, John! Don't eat that paste, John!" *Emergence* chief designer Tom Mustaine explains, "Blade doesn't have a voice, for story reasons...but it's also been many years since FPS games had a chatty main character." Expect Blade to get more talkative in future installments. For the moment, though, a bullet is worth a thousand words.

BRAINS OVER BRAWN

When it comes to action, *Emergence* chases the shooter dragon with a junkie's zeal—and the Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment (DDA) system is the game's greatest strength. Tracking every facet of what you're doing (down to the number of footsteps taken) and adjusting difficulty on the fly, DDA showcases *Emergence* as more than a simple shooting gallery. Troops communicate with each other, pull back, and team up if you're chewing through a level. Hey, Valve? Take some notes before completing *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*, because *Episode One*'s pacing is, at times, pokey by comparison. Just don't fall into *Emergence*'s trap of forcing players to quicksave and reload to deal with several cheap enemies-popping-out-of-nowhere moments.

At least enemies look good (if a little *Half-Life*-ish) while you're dying, thanks to a modded Source engine. Environmental details also show off a good deal of interactivity, but we wish the oh-so-in-vogue physics puzzles here weren't so amateurish—a propane tank set by itself next to a precariously placed girder might as well have a blinking neon sign saying, "Shoot me!" Interestingly, items you monkey with allegedly have repercussions in later episodes.

It's time for me to eat a little crow: I, along with many critics, originally dinged *Emergence* for a content drought. When encountering multiple waves of the same armored baddies in a short six-hour ride, you can't help but feel shortchanged. In retrospect, *Emergence*'s five different enemy types count for more than the one new kamikaze headcrab zombie we got in *Half-Life 2: Episode One*. However, *Emergence*'s scant three firearms—a handgun, an assault rifle, and a shotgun—are the unbuttered toast of FPS games. Sure, the arsenal feels substantially meaty...but how about some original gear? According to Mustaine, "Future episodes will increase the total gun count. We also plan on episode-specific weapons, some that you will see in one episode, but never in another."

Who cares if *Emergence* is a by-the-numbers shooter? It's still a fun thrill ride on some base level. The designers just need to tinker with the narrative and refine some gameplay issues if they hope people will come back for more. That's one advantage of episodic games: Maybe the next installment will fix everything.

/Darren Gladstone

» THE DYNAMIC DIFFICULTY ADJUSTMENT SYSTEM IS THE GAME'S GREATEST STRENGTH.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

What could've been a shaky shooting gallery makes for a decent start to the reborn series.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	7/10
GAMESPOT	7.3/10
GAMESPY	3/5
IGN	8/10

ROGUE TROOPER

Once is more than enough



▲ Airships called hoppers bring in reinforcements...



▲ ...Until you sabotage the landing pads by solving a "puzzle" that involves pressing the "E" key at the right place.

THE JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER OF GAMES BASED ON COMICS

In 1999, *Rogue Trooper* developer Rebellion bought the publisher of the *Rogue Trooper* comics, 2000 AD...which probably made haggling over the rights to make a *Rogue Trooper* game much easier.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Rebellion** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
REQUIRED: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players**

KRISTAN REED'S EUROGAMER.NET review of *Rogue Trooper* (Eidos' third-person action shooter) is among the most charitable. But even he admits, "Whether you use the basic pistol, the machine gun, shotgun, mortar or beam rifle...clusters of enemies just fall like ninepins.... The sense of tension and achievement is lost in a blizzard of fallen [enemies]."

But in the comments section following his review, some1 (yes, someone named "some1") replies, "I've been reading a few of the reviews on Metacritic...and the one thing they do all agree on is that there is loads of replay value because you can use the abilities to tackle situations in a lot of different and interesting ways."

Leaving aside the point that this is patently untrue—most reviews decry *Rogue Trooper*'s lack of replay value—let's give this a shot: I'll run through the game's Nu Paree level a few times, trying out different approaches. I chose that level because it's actually cool in a *Blade-Runner*-on-an-engine-that-can-be-easily-ported-to-multiple-platforms-especially-the-PS2 kind of way. Let's see how it turns out.

TOURING NU PAREE

The first time through, I just run-and-gun it—pretty standard stuff. On my second trip, I limit myself to grenades. *Rogue Trooper* has four grenade types: standard frag grenades, sticky bombs that conveniently veer toward their targets, area-effect incendiary grenades, and scrambler grenades. You can call up a display that shows you the exact arc of your toss, making it easy to chuck a grenade just where you want it. Nu Paree is still pretty easy, even though I have no way to kill snipers.

I try the stealth approach for my third run. This is dead simple if you hang back and snipe with the silencer; it helps that patrol cycles don't get disrupted too much when enemy soldiers see a colleague mysteriously collapse. Hand-to-hand kills are too tedious to set up, and the salvage bonus isn't worth it.

BOOOOOOOORING

Bored out of my skull by the fourth trip, I decide I'll use only the mortar. Whenever it runs out of ammo, I just make more—which is what you can do with the salvage parts lifted off of dead bodies. *Rogue Trooper*'s economy booms; ammunition, grenades, and healing are plentiful and dirt cheap. All goes well, so on my fifth time through, I decide to do it without making any medkits. By this point, I'm so familiar with the level that it's easy to avoid taking damage. In fact, I can probably play it with my eyes closed by now.

For my sixth runthrough, I decide to use only the beam weapon. About halfway into the level, I just give up. What am I trying to prove? Very little changes based on whatever weapons I use or whatever limits I put on myself. The game features plenty of flexibility for how you kill the bad guys, but it offers no compelling reason for you to employ any elaborate methods. One way is as good as any other, and they're all equally available, given that you can buy whatever you want with salvage items. It's hardly a substitute for replay value.

If you take a game that's composed entirely of canned set pieces—say, *Rogue Trooper*—and play it over and over and over, you're going to make yourself hate it. I liked it only mildly enough the first time. So it just goes to show that in a game this thin, familiarity breeds contempt. **/Tom Chick**

ONE WAY IS AS GOOD AS ANY OTHER, AND THEY'RE ALL EQUALLY AVAILABLE.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

A thin action-shooter with almost no replayability.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	6/10
GAMESPOT	6.7/10
GAMESPY	—
IGN	8/10

COLUMN

LINE OF ATTACK

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HARDCORE WAR-GAMING

WAR-BLOGGER!
Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's war-gaming blog at grognards.1UP.com.

VAPORWARE!

BACK WHEN I WROTE THE *INSIDE Wargaming* column for CGW about five years ago, I got the chance to try out a beta PC version of *World in Flames*, the popular strategic-level World War II game from Australian Design Group. In my column, dated April 2001, the game's coding was allegedly "95-percent done." Today, the game is under development by a different team—still unfinished.

Vaporware clouds the war-gaming genre. Unsurprising, since so many projects amount to one-man shows, powered by enthusiasm, that peter out when life intrudes. A few months ago, I wrote about JASL, a project to bring *Advanced Squad Leader* to the PC. The project's page still features a flashing "new!" icon for the latest version...dated November 2004 (although I understand work continues and further versions have been made available for download).

This hobby is all about overreaching. How many cardboard war games did we buy just because they were big and cool? Even though we couldn't imagine finishing them, something about them fired up the imagination. It's the same impulse that gave birth to the ultimate vaporware war game: *Road to Moscow*, for which Arsenal Publishing inked a publishing deal in February 1996. That's even worse than *Duke Nukem Forever*'s track record.

As I scroll through forum after forum for unreleased war games, I wonder how much of this is actually essential for the hobby. For every abandoned project, another promising game goes into development. After the disappointing *Crown of Glory* last summer, many stalwarts hung their hopes on *Empires in Arms*—the game about which developer Marshall Ellis posted on the game's official forum, "We've still got some work to do, *but* I'm still hopeful to be finished in the next month or two!"

That was in August of last year. No matter how often our hearts get broken, we still dream. / **Bruce Geryk**



Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk can probably kick your ass at any board game, any day of the week.



▲ ***World in Flames*, "95-percent done" as of April 2001. We're still waiting.**



▲ ***Empires in Arms*, said last year to ship "in the next month or two." We're still waiting.**



▲ ***Road to Moscow*, initially announced in 1996. We're still waiting.**

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Demon or misunderstood genius? Who cares?! Is it my turn yet?



Attack a boat and you'll engage in combat...on a boat!

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC V

GET THE PATCH NOW!
The *Heroes V* v1.1 patch is available now at FileFront.com. Don't play without it!

We're one *Patch of Might & Magic* away...

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **Turn-based strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
REQUIRED: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard disk space** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players**

THAT SLIGHTLY NASAL *WHOOSHING* sound you hear is the collective sigh of relief coming from fantasy-strategy geeks everywhere. Hallelujah! *Heroes of Might & Magic V* does not suck! New developer Nival Interactive (makers of the *Silent Storm* games) and publisher Ubisoft accomplished a miracle with this formerly dead turn-based strategy series: They've resurrected it, made it all pretty with a new 3D engine, and almost completely recaptured the gameplay that made the first games so addictive. The only bummer? It didn't become worthy of this kind of praise until the release of a significant patch several weeks after the game shipped.

JUST ONE MORE TURN...

The core of *Heroes V* remains unchanged from previous versions: a yummy mix of map exploration, resource-gathering, city-building, and tactical turn-based combat, set against a high-fantasy backdrop. The *Heroes* series always nailed this balance just right, and Nival doesn't mess with success, thankfully, always giving you plenty to do and compelling you to take "just one more turn."

The move to a 3D engine—despite some horrendous prepatch slowdowns—mostly succeeds, with all the familiar creatures, objects, and environments brought vividly to life on both the adventure maps and combat screens. Combat is wonderfully animated, with the camera swooping in at key moments when creatures clash. The beautiful adventure maps occasionally get tough to navigate, with environments so dense that you often end up missing key items, which forces you to waste turns backtracking to pick them up.

More problematic is the single-player campaign itself, which comprises the bulk of your play experience...and, right out of the box, is too hard, too inconsistent, and too imbalanced from mission to mission. An endless "tutorial" goes on about four missions too long—after that, though, the game gets nearly impossible, even at the "normal" difficulty setting. Even on the best of the missions, the game is mercilessly stingy about providing players with enough resources...and then stacks the deck further with ridiculously tough A.I. enemies.

Adding insult to injury, the game doesn't give you much to do beyond the campaign. *Heroes V* ships with a measly six skirmish maps and no map editor. Worse, the skirmish maps themselves are "story-based," meaning you're forced to play as a certain faction and complete certain goals, rather than allowed to choose your own sandbox-style playing conditions. Given that the *Heroes* series traditionally thrived on skirmish maps—whether user-created or from developers—it's a shockingly egregious oversight.

Finally, a ton of inexcusable bugs plague *Heroes V*'s retail release, including an initiative bar that misreports the number of units left in creature stacks during combat, a miscounting of units *after* battles, random desktop crashes, and almost completely broken multiplayer.

POSTPATCH JOY

So while *CGW* contributor Matt Peckham's 1UP.com review score (5 out of 10) seems overly harsh to some, I think it was the right call for the game that shipped. With the v1.1 patch, some utterly essential fixes bumped up the game's quality tremendously. In addition to fixing the worst of the bugs—that is, the game doesn't crash anymore, the in-battle tallies are now correct, and the multiplayer is playable—Nival mercifully tweaked some of the missions and added an "easy" mode to the campaign. We still don't get a map editor or new skirmish maps, though... so once you *do* finish the campaign, you're pretty much done. Which sucks. So let's hope Nival gets that stuff out soon—then we'll be able to rave about *Heroes V* with no reservations whatsoever. **/ Jeff Green**

HALLELUJAH! *HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V* DOES NOT SUCK!

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

One more patch (and one map editor) away from greatness...but still a welcome return for an old strategy favorite.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	5/10
GAMESPOT	8.2/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	7.8/10

FINAL FANTASY XI: TREASURES OF AHT URHGAN

All grown up

BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW...

Over half a million North American subscribers would rather stick with *FFXI*'s deep gameplay than patronize more populated pastures like *World of WarCraft*.



Magic, demons, and death penalties—just another typical day in *FFXI*.

New monster classes, such as this massive troll, provide more variety in combat.

Even with all the unbalanced additions, grouping is still the fastest way to gain XP.

PUBLISHER: **Square Enix** DEVELOPER: **Square Enix** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **Teen** REQUIRED: **800MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, Internet connection, *Final Fantasy XI*** RECOMMENDED: **1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively so**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

FINAL FANTASY XI, AS A SERIES, branches out in an arc not dissimilar to human aging. The original game set the stage as an infantlike MMORPG ripe for tweaking, patching, and finessing. The first expansion, *Rise of the Zilart* (included as part of *FFXI*'s North American debut), let players now comfortable with the early-game skills ply their trade in whole new regions and environments, while offering new jobs to master. The follow-up, *Chains of Promathia*, is where *FFXI* went all gothic teen angst—difficult and frustrating, but that's a part of growing up. *Treasures of Aht Urhgan*, at long last, thrusts *FFXI* into full adulthood for its fourth (and possibly final) chapter.

While *FFXI* is, in general, much less forgiving than a game like *World of WarCraft*, sustained play teaches players the ins and outs of the game's battle system and, in turn, reveals a greater payoff for skilled, cooperative play with one's party members. It's difficult at first, and the true beauty of the game manifests later rather than sooner—in the high-level, endgame areas where players battle the gods. This remains so in *Treasures*, and gamers can either accept this or not.

The installation process, layers of menus, and old-fashioned experience-point grind clearly vexed GameSpot's reviewer, who seems to think that the game's recent Xbox 360 port holds appeal only for new users, failing to realize that the conversion imparts a haven for players whose PlayStation 2s had dried up (or who just wanted the power of PC-quality graphics at a console price). It's too bad many people won't realize that the process of leveling up is aided by *Treasures*' new areas, where low-HP mobs and experience-enhancing items and job abilities expedite the grind to the game's level-75 cap.

GameSpy, on the other hand, knows the game's inner workings and battle system much better, pointing out that—despite vague quest details that send players flipping through online FAQs—*FFXI* features an evolved communication system, insidiously deep crafting mechanics, and a mentor system designed to help veterans assist newcomers to the game.

A BETTER MOUSETRAP

The big question, though: Does *Treasures* add to the legacy...or detract from it in the way that the previous expansion, *Chains of Promathia*, did? While many zealots argue that *Promathia*'s story line made that expansion worthwhile, its sheer difficulty and low incentive made for a game that catered to the hardcore—in theory, shrinking *FFXI*'s appeal and sending droves of players to games like *WOW* and *Guild Wars*. *Treasures* puts the brakes on this decline, with three new job classes (Blue Mage, Corsair, and Puppetmaster) that—while currently unbalanced and overpowered—introduce some cool new party-configuration possibilities. The basic game mechanics remain the same, crossing the traditional turn-based combat of the *Final Fantasy* series with the real-time involvement of an action-RPG. Once you engage an enemy, a palette of options appears, offering you the chance to cast spells, use special attacks, and activate job-specific abilities.

One particularly useful new feature, Assault—a mode that allows small parties to engage in different miniraids for a short period of time—offers incentives like armor, weapons, and fame within the game. The other major addition, Besieged, promises massive enemy raids on player towns...but it's currently broken due to too many players and enemies being shoehorned into one small, instanced area.

The bottom line: People will either appreciate the depth of *FFXI* despite some of the above-mentioned hurdles, or they'll move on to less-demanding MMOs. *Treasures*' swanky Arabian-themed graphical style still doesn't hold a candle to those of games like *Oblivion*, but the organic environments and more realistically proportioned characters ensure that *FFXI* continues to age better than many of its competitors. / **James Mielke**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Less forgiving than *World of WarCraft* and lacking the tech innovations of *Guild Wars*, *FFXI* stands on the merits of its great controls, constant improvements, and mind-numbing depth.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	9/10
GAMESPOT	6/10
GAMESPY	3/5
IGN	6.9/10

THE TRUE BEAUTY OF THE GAME MANIFESTS LATER RATHER THAN SOONER.



▲ The clichéd story unfolds through in-game cut-scenes...and the characters' mouths still don't move.



▲ Group with real players—ArenaNet's idiotic AOE "fixes" mean NPC henchmen still suck.

GUILD WARS FACTIONS

Assassin LFG

EXTRA LIVING QUARTERS

Full up on characters? Don't worry—*Factions* provides two extra character slots for existing *Guild Wars* players.

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **ArenaNet** GENRE: **Action-MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box, Download (www.plaync.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
REQUIRED: **800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **1GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, *Guild Wars*** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively so**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

JUNE 14, 2006: "YOU HAVE PLAYED this character for 172 hours, 27 minutes over the past 39 days." If that isn't a glowing endorsement of how much I enjoy *Guild Wars Factions*, the first stand-alone expansion to developer ArenaNet's free-to-play action-MMORPG, then I don't know what is.

Factions retains the sort of gameplay you'd expect in a *Guild Wars* game (or most any fantasy MMORPG, for that matter): Kill monsters, gain experience, earn new skills, and battle it out in player-versus-player arena combat. The six core professions introduced in the original game (henceforth referred to as *Guild Wars Prophecies*) each gain numerous combat options, but the lion's share of the attention goes to *Factions*' two new professions: The assassin and the ritualist.

PUTTING THE ASS IN ASSASSIN

Anyone who played *Factions* during its first weeks no doubt experienced the glut of dagger-wielding assassin characters—usually manned by players attempting to employ the class as a frontline fighter instead of as the calculating hit-and-run damage-dealer it's meant to be. The assassin really shines in the hands of a capable player who knows how to take advantage of its high-damage attack chains, but ultimately lacks the raw versatility of core professions such as the ranger and mesmer. Conversely, the creepy, shamanlike ritualist goes for a jack-of-all-trades support role and fails on all fronts. This profession's muddled blend of healing spells and spirit minions make it very micromanagement-intensive, and essentially demands twice the work to achieve half the results of, say, a dedicated monk or necromancer.

The campaign itself makes up for the new professions' shortcomings: *Factions* introduces Cantha, a land with an exotic Asian motif and a much better cadence than that of the comparatively uneven *Prophecies*. You can actually hit the game's 20-level cap before leaving the tutorial island, making *Factions* the full realization of ArenaNet's antigrind mantra. This energetic pacing persists throughout the 13-mission story line, and while you do have to slog through some mazelike adventure areas ("It's easy to get lost and have to backtrack ridiculous distances," 1UP.com reviewer Joel Durham Jr. rightly points out), most of *Factions*' environments trump *Prophecies*' often irritating level design. The new tiered mission scoring system (you earn rewards based on time and performance) improves on *Prophecies*' difficult bonus objectives, and multiple groups can compete for ranked scores in certain challenge scenarios.

GOT FACTION?

Player-versus-environment and player-versus-player gameplay aspects were largely split in *Prophecies*, but *Factions* unifies the two camps, pitting player guild alliances against one another for control of 18 different contested outposts throughout Cantha. Victories yield faction points, which your alliance can collectively exchange for a controlling interest in one of the contested outposts—and access to perks such as elite mission areas.

It's an interesting and competitive system—but, as GameSpy reviewer Miguel Lopez explains, it caters toward the hardcore. "Ingenious indeed," he writes, "but exclusionary to the average player who can't get into one of the big guilds." Casual players might instead take advantage of the new guild-scrimmage mode, though these battles could use something beyond the lone capture-the-flag mode currently offered (a simple 8-on-8 knock-down, drag-out battle might be fun).

But now I'm just nitpicking—the great thing about *Factions* is that it offers something for everyone, rewarding skill and ingenuity rather than time served, catering to a variety of play styles, and opening a slew of options that (new professions aside) easily outshine *Prophecies*. Says 1UP.com's Durham: "Whether you want to gather with a few friends or start a massive guild, whether you'd care to play through the adventure or take on the world, *Guild Wars Factions* has something for you." Believe it. / **Ryan Scott**

THE CAMPAIGN ITSELF MAKES UP FOR THE NEW PROFESSIONS' SHORTCOMINGS.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Indisputably the best entry point for *Guild Wars* newcomers—and one great reason for existing players to stay on board.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	9/10
GAMESPOT	8.5/10
GAMESPY	4.5/5
IGN	8.5/10

COLUMN

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF AN MMORPG ADDICT

ROLLIN' OUT

WHILE I SPENT THE LAST MONTH trying to get up to speed on *Guild Wars* and its new assassin class (after spending a decent chunk of time away from the game), I got sidetracked by another recent NCsoft title—one that I was curious about, but not particularly compelled to play: *Auto Assault*, the wreck-a-licious new *Twisted Metal*-meets-MMO postapocalyptic game that breaks the MMORPG genre's ubiquitous *D&D* mold. EA's *Motor City Online* attempted the "car-PG" thing a few years back with disastrous results, and I'm hoping *Auto Assault* doesn't suffer the same fate.

And depending on how you look at it, why should it? *AA* has a lot going for it: It's good-lookin', it's easy to pick up and play (picture *World of WarCraft*, except with cars), and it's fun. Plus, it's published by NCsoft, the MMO expert...so I expect much better support than what EA coughed up for *MCO*. The real disparity between something like *WOW* and *AA*, though, is the population. In *WOW*—which naturally enjoys the advantage of a loyal, built-in following—we see new servers pop up all the time, thanks to the insane number of players. But *AA* forges a brand-new IP, a risk factor clearly reflected in the low-to-very-low populations that its servers (as of this writing in June) maintain.

I hope that more people give *AA* a spin (no pun intended) and find out what a cool game it is (check this month's review on page 88 to find out what I mean), as I can only imagine what a world full of cars, trucks, and dune buggies would be like if it were buzzing with enthusiastic people. I bet the PVP zones would rock pretty hard, with rival factions of humans, biomeks, and mutants all blasting each other to bits. With no death penalties in the game, PVP is really a painless endeavor, and it seems like the gun-shy players out there would find more reason to participate when they're rolling around in monster cars with big guns.

TRAVELING THE ROAD TO RUIN

As you might expect, you can equip your rig with better gear as you level up—but at the expense of meaningful characterization. Sure, each of *AA*'s three races gets a representative "face," but players get no specific NPC avatars to rally behind. You've got a woman, a woman with green eyes, and a dude who looks like he walked off the set of *Mad Max*. Wouldn't the game-buying public warm to the concept quicker if *AA* presented more actual characters instead of just big metal cars? You do get to create a humanoid avatar to drive your car...but the game doesn't exploit this element to its fullest, and you generally just don't get a lot of options here.

If people don't "get it," they're not going to pick up the game. Since I have the luxury of trying out these games ahead of time, I know that *AA* is good times, but it's a lot more difficult for the average consumer to see that from the outside. For someone to even give this game a shot, they have to pick it up and contemplate paying a monthly fee. "Is it worth the trouble of downloading and installing?" they'll wonder, and, unlike the typical fantasy MMO, it's not as clear-cut a decision. Some sort of endearing characterization might lure a few more people in; maybe, as a start, NCsoft could put a 3D head in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen that reacts to the carnage. And possibly the avatar of someone you're targeting in PVP play, so you can actually see who you're attacking. Adding a little more personality to the game would make things a little more...well, *personal*. And that's a good start right there. **/James Mielke**



1UP.com executive editor James Mielke spends every iota of his free time playing online games. He needs help—badly.

YOU CAN EQUIP YOUR RIG WITH BETTER GEAR AS YOU LEVEL UP—BUT AT THE EXPENSE OF MEANINGFUL CHARACTERIZATION.



▲ **Nearly every mission in *Auto Assault* is soloable, for better or worse.**



▲ **Even tough boss monsters remain imminently "doable" without your seeking other players' help.**



▲ This is probably the only time you'll see this many players in the same place at the same time.



▲ The characters actually look pretty good, given that they spend 98 percent of their lives inside their cars.

COMPLETE 360

Got an Xbox 360 controller? Take it for a spin—*Auto Assault* includes built-in support for these pads.

AUTO AS

More roadkill on the MMO highway?

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **NetDevil** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box, download (www.autoassault.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** REQUIRED: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **2.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB videocard, headset** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively so**

WELCOME TO THE WASTELAND OF *Auto Assault*—a blasted, abandoned stretch of highway, barren of life but for the occasional lone survivor struggling vainly to hang on. Sadly, we're not talking about *AA*'s setting; the game itself amounts to an online no-man's-land, situated somewhere in the flyover country between MMORPGs and action games. It's worth visiting just to say that you've been there...but apparently not the best place to hang around if you want meaningful human interaction in your games.

Just why the hell is that? Most reviews have been giving it noncommittal scores (we're talking the ubiquitous 7-out-of-10s) without a lot of agreement about why, while alternately praising and condemning the game's departures from MMO conventions. GameSpot's Jeff Gerstmann puts the game's lack of a death penalty in the list of bad things because, "you never really feel any tension from the battles," while IGN's Tom McNamara says, "You may believe that death penalties are 'meaningful' and make the game more 'challenging.' I prefer not to be punished for trying to 'have some fun.'"

CRUISE CONTROL

Other reviews hail the game's "solo-ability" as either refreshing or self-defeating...and a surprising number of players actually want a game they can play with one frontal lobe tied behind their back. "I like to be able to play a game where I can accomplish things while still doing one or two other things. Such as when I raid on the weekends—I can usually make dinner while I'm doing it," writes Rude on the official *Auto Assault* forums. Depending on whom you ask, the game either doesn't behave enough like an MMO, or it doesn't behave enough like a straight-up action title; either it's too different, not different enough, or just different in the wrong ways.

Not that the game is without issues everyone can agree on—mostly the cloud of minor bugs that began swarming the title during beta. One universal acknowledgement knocks *AA*'s baffling lack of an auction house, effectively throttling the in-game economy. A potentially deep crafting system in there somewhere, too...but without other players or an easy means of trading with them, you just don't have much justification for learning its intricacies.

But players don't often mention any of these flaws when they bother to say why they're quitting. Frustration-riddled posts line the game's official forums, such as "I love this game, but one of the main things that draws me to any MMO is the fact that there are people to interact with," and "I've already cut my six-month subscription down to three, and the clock is ticking each day I log on, and nobody else is playing. I don't play MMOs to solo in an environment devoid of other players." So nobody wants to play because nobody else is playing. It's a self-defeating cycle—one that will probably run the game over and leave it for dead on the side of the road.

LOST HIGHWAY

Even *with* a critical, self-sustaining mass of players, you wouldn't have much reason to actually play *AA* with other people. Grouping isn't actively discouraged, but in all but a few cases, it's completely unnecessary...compounded by *AA*'s aforementioned auction-house-lacking



Screw corpse runs—we've got helicopters.



An abandoned playground. How poignant!

SAULT



gameplay (which renders the player economy stillborn). The only real player interaction happens through optional PVP, itself relegated to arena matches and a single high-level zone for interfaction conflict. You have no way to view the details of another player's gear, removing the vital elements of prestige and competitiveness. Taken together, these factors essentially translate *AA* into a decent single-player game with a monthly fee.

Sadly, consolidating the game's underpopulated servers would be less a solution and more an embarrassing admission of defeat. "Nothing says 'We failed—our population sucks' more than a server shutdown.... They might as well pull the plug on all the servers after that," writes Reasan on the *AA* forums. It might mean that (for a while, at least) we wouldn't have to drive across the entire world without encountering another player...but putting more people in the same place without giving them a reason to actually play together hardly solves the problem. Most MMO players group out of necessity; otherwise, they're just getting in each other's way and competing for the same resources.

At this point, we have no idea how to save the game, short of a complete overhaul. Either retooling all of the classes to make them more interdependent or making it an entirely instanced game and converting it to a free *Guild Wars*–like model might help. The second option is probably technically impossible; the first, on the other hand, would likely only piss off a small core of diehards (unless we're talking a full *Star Wars Galaxies*–style relaunch). But *AA* already went through one rebuild midway through its beta; as much as we like the game, we'd be shocked if it stuck around long enough for a second overhaul. / **Scott Sharkey**

A DECENT SINGLE-PLAYER GAME WITH A MONTHLY FEE.

AUTO ASSAULT: THE TCG

Worlds Apart Productions' *Auto Assault Trading Card Game* removes the action element of *AA* and replaces it with the privilege of paying cash for virtual cardboard. Yeah, nobody else wants to play it, either. Hell, this kind of thing never really caught on—not even the most serious *Final Fantasy XI* players bother with that game's attendant CCG, and that one doesn't require players to pay for their cards. This could might make a great free promo for the game, or a fun distraction if it were embedded in the game itself...but the model they're using now just ain't gonna work unless they put *Magic* in the name.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

We've still got a foot on the gas pedal—we only wish it wasn't such a lonely trip.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	7.2/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	7.5/10

PARADISE

Paradise lousy



▲ Your duties in *Paradise* include wandering around this terrarium hunting for a tiny handful of hot spots—how fun!



MR. POPULAR

Benoît Sokal's *Syberia* and *Amerzone* sold over half a million copies each.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **White Birds Productions** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
REQUIRED: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

COMIC BOOKS CAN BE ASTOUNDINGLY complex. To paraphrase one of the medium's celebrated artists, each panel's a shot in time daringly plucked from a potential thousand. And the images? Abstractions of a subject focusing our attention on its most memorable elements: eyes on a face, spots on a cow, branches on a tree, zits on a—you get the picture. Contemporary adventure games work similarly, but instead of pictures, they parse activities, shuffling you through lavishly detailed locales while limiting rather profoundly what you can do...focusing your "logic lens," in other words. You may be standing just outside the world's frilliest bedroom with minutiae everywhere, but your actions are limited to: enter bedroom, open desk drawer, take needle and thread, thread needle, use on ripped dress in inventory, and presto—you're ready for the ball, Cinderella.

But while clever puzzling rules, rambling activities are chores. I hate to bellyache, but point-and-guess exploration hit conceptual high water with *King's Quest* two decades ago. Before you grumble "great, adventure troll," I'm not—honest to *Grim Fandango*. From *Colossal Cave* to *The Longest Journey*, it's because I love a good rip as much as you do that I'm so blah about adventure games that take great story concepts and muzzle them with moth-eaten mechanics...games like Benoît Sokal's *Paradise*.

It's the sort of release that gets a "from the award-winning game creator" slapped above Sokal's name on the box, implying we're in capable hands. But, no, *Paradise* is like a canticle for everything that stubbornly bled this genre into the bargain bin. Flush with non sequiturs, its baffling puzzles pivot on bumbling antics. Half the game equals swishing the mouse around picturesque 2D renders, hunting for hot spots in search of improbable doodads, then wandering to and fro hoping you have the right stuff to capriciously trigger a cut-scene or conversation topic. It gives new significance to the notion of "accidental tourist." Cafelix, a poster on the game's official message board, rightly grouses: "Spending all of my time scanning each scene with the cursor to find invisible click-spots is not my idea of a game."

And, unlike that of Sokal's *Syberia*, the plot in *Paradise* plods at best. In the fictional African country of Maurania, you play the supposedly estranged daughter of the nation's pitiless dictator, who sends for you in hope of rallying the country to his cause with new blood. But your plane's shot down en route—and then you awaken, trapped in a palace harem with no memory of your identity (thank you, O wise and powerful amnesiac plot device). The highlight of the first several hours? Making perfume. A few hours later? Finding parts for a truck. And just when you think it can't possibly get duller (or dumber), it does, with a few silly run-and-jump 3D minigames involving a panther. They're buggy, ugly as sin, and should have hit the cutting room floor.

Speaking of looks, you'd be hard-pressed to carp about Sokal's beautiful art (the box credits all 350 environments as "personally created" by him) if it weren't for the horrid 800x600 resolution lock. Imagine a Da Vinci wrapped in filmy plastic, and you have a sense of how disappointingly opaque the artsy locales look. GameSpot reviewer Greg Mueller (who scored the game a merciful 5.8 out of 10) pretty much nails it: "The backgrounds look nice, and the story does manage to get slightly interesting toward the end, but the game requires a substantial amount of work without much reward."

The skeleton of a decent game's here—mostly in Sokal's art—but, as with *Lost*'s mysterious numbers or *Battlestar Galactica*'s quest for Earth, if you want us to play, you'd better be able to pay up...and *Paradise*'s plot and puzzles don't. Not by a long shot. / **Matt Peckham**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Illogical puzzles disengaged from a plodding plot; attractive visuals botched by fuzzy 2D renders.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	4/10
GAMESPOT	5.8/10
GAMESPY	—
IGN	6.2/10

LIKE A CANTICLE FOR EVERYTHING THAT STUBBORNLY BLED THIS GENRE INTO THE BARGAIN BIN.

COLUMN

FALLING PIECES

OUR FAVORITE WAYS TO WASTE SPARE TIME

CASUAL CENTRAL

Looking for a good casual game to play? We recommend heading over to PopCap Games at www.popcap.com.

PHAT CASH

WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE? OK, maybe—at best—probably a hundredaire. A thousandaire if you're really lucky. Whatever—it's hard to beat having a chance at winning cash for playing solitaire or simple word games. That's part of the appeal of Club Pogo, a casual-gaming site that offers something more than high scores and personal satisfaction.

At $35 annually (or $6 on a monthly basis), Club Pogo costs more than most casual games, but you're spared pop-up ads and given the opportunity to win tangible prizes. You won't find anything superhardcore among the 75-plus games here, but then again, Microsoft bundles *Solitaire* with Windows for a good reason—it can be stupidly addictive. More so with Club Pogo's *World Class Solitaire*, which adds some strategic twists. And while *QWERTY* is a simple crossword game, it's hard to beat the satisfaction you get from trouncing another player online.

As fun as the games are (and with 1.2 million subscribers in two years—each averaging 14 hours per week—they'd *better* be fun), the rewards provide the real hook. Wins earn tokens, which are tradable for things such as avatar upgrades, special badges, and entries into daily, weekly, and monthly cash-prize drawings. Topping it all off: a prize spinner that gives game winners a chance to score up to $4,999. That's a pretty nice carrot to dangle in front of some Java games.

STAY ON TARGET!

Even if you don't want to join Club Pogo, you owe it to yourself to download *Alien Stars* from the core Pogo site, pogo.com. This top-down shooter follows in the *Galaga* mold, except it's a lot prettier—and tougher. Each of the game's 12 levels packs an unholy number of enemies and obstacles to destroy (or avoid) before a face-off against a massive boss. *Alien Stars* doesn't reinvent the wheel—but it does dip that wheel in chocolate and unicorns and happy laughing babies, making it pretty much irresistible. Of course, plenty of power-ups that actually bring a strategic edge to the action help make it fun, too. It's a bargain at just $20. / **Robert Coffey**



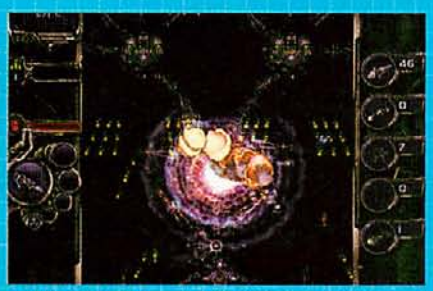
CGW alum Robert Coffey blames his inability to get anything done on "column research." He's really just playing word games online.



One of the less hectic moments in *Alien Stars*.



You know what's nice about crushing a stranger in an online word game? Everything.



***Alien Stars*' secondary weapons such as this nuke help tip the odds in your favor.**

nerds are for dorks
GEEKS ARE 4-EVER
hacker instead of slacker
Alpha Geek, Turbo Nerd, Proto-hacker
IM NOT ABOUT TO TEST MY $ most alive when LIFE
24/7
Im playing in the sandbox
Network guru. CGI characters
Network Security backbone
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THE MORE, THE MERRIER

GRAW PC allows for up to 32 players online, as opposed to only 16 for the Xbox 360 version.

GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Not such a friendly ghost

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **GRIN** GENRE: **Tactical Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail Box, Download (www.direct2drive.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** REQUIRED: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **2.8GHz CPU, 256MB videocard, physics card, headset, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players**

WHEN UBISOFT UNCEREMONIOUSLY punted the PC version of *Ghost Recon 2* in the spring of last year, armchair spec-ops guys around the world issued a collective "WTF?". Ubisoft's justification was matter-of-fact: "With the launch of *Ghost Recon 3* planned for winter 2005, significant human resources were needed to ensure the quality of the future installment of the series, thus potentially jeopardizing the quality of either *Ghost Recon 2* PC or *Ghost Recon 3*." Translated into non-corp-speak: "Why sink money into a PC-only version of the game when we can spend it on the more lucrative console market instead?"

But...but...we PC gamers—the few, the proud, the hardcore-enough-to-wear-fatigues-to-an-*online*-match—surely *we* deserve the best in next-gen tactical shooter development! We certainly appreciate it more than some 11-year-old with an Xbox 360 who has never been through SEAL training (or at least, you know, watched a three-part special about it on the Military Channel) like we have.

Now, one year after that angry, slightly pathetic time, Ubisoft wants to recapture the PC market with *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, starting with a smart strategic decision: Despite the fact that *GRAW* appears on the PlayStation 2, Xbox, and Xbox 360, developer GRIN offers significantly different versions for each system. And I can say, without reservation, that the PC version is the definitive one, being the largest, toughest, and most tactically oriented. On the other hand, it's also the most aggravating, primarily because of poor execution and over-the-top system requirements.

BRING OUT THE GIMP

The action in *GRAW* goes down in a near-future Mexico City, where the leaders of the three major North American countries (together for a joint summit) come under attack from a rebel faction of the Mexican army. The wussy-ass Canadian PM is, of course, killed right off the bat...so it's up to U.S. Special Forces to save the two presidents who were men enough to stay alive. And while the PC and console versions share the same story, they don't share the same play style. As Patrick Joynt says in his 1UP.com review, "the PC version focuses 100 percent on bringing the series back to the tactical-shooter audience." You command a squad of three (essentially nameless and faceless) guys, either via a real-time satellite map or with quick orders issued directly from the HUD.

Now, I use the term "command" loosely: The interface is streamlined to very simple point-and-click options—great if you could

LACK OF BASIC A.I. FUNCTIONALITY ADDS NO MORE TENSION TO A GAME THAN FORGOING A CALCULATOR ADDS TENSION TO A MATH PROBLEM.



▲ A group of rebels uses a semi and some boxes as a makeshift fortification...



▲ ...Since I'm pinned down in front, I send my guys around the flank...



▲ ...Then I take down anyone they flush out.



▲ Things blow up real good in *GRAW*: Note the way that the "heat" from the explosion bends the image toward the top of the screen.

issue general orders and count on your A.I. teammates to take it from there. But *GRAW*'s A.I. won't take anything except a dump on your best-laid plans. Set up one of your guys at a defilade, and you can bet he'll end up shot in the ass, watching the wrong angle. Worse, teammates never move or displace on their own, even in the face of extreme threats such as enemy armor. Since your men aren't particularly good at taking cover either, this means they're constantly getting turned into extrachunky Ragu.

Micromanagement offers a potential remedy, as Joynt points out: "You can go into the tactical map and...tell your squadmates...which direction to face and how far away to focus." But while this meticulous approach works when you have time to set up, it's hardly practical when you're under fire—which is often the case, since the PC version features a very high number of enemies. I don't agree with the argument that the necessity for constant micromanagement increases suspense or enjoyment (in *GRAW* or other any tactical shooter). Lack of basic A.I. functionality adds no more tension to a game than forgoing a calculator adds tension to a math problem; it's just doing something the hard way for its own sake. On Ubisoft's official forum, several posters have brought up the marked difference between *GRAW*'s A.I. and that of another squad-based Ubisoft series: *Brothers in Arms*. One entry puts it pointedly: "GRIN could learn a lot from Gearbox [developer of the *BIA* series]."

THE ROYALE WITH CHEESE

Another complaint about *GRAW* PC, both on the forums and in professional reviews: The game's system requirements reach beyond the capabilities of most current-gen machines. To get anything resembling a pleasing visual experience, you need a mammoth GPU, as any videocard sans 512MB of VRAM isn't even *allowed* to set the detail to High. An AGEIA physics card (*GRAW* is the first game to support such hardware) adds nominal PhysX features to the game, but even that doesn't do much for the performance. Even on a juggernaut rig, the game suffers serious framerate issues during large firefights and takes longer to load a mission than our commander-in-chief takes to say "prestidigitation." Since saving is checkpoint-only (not *everything* was changed from the console version, apparently), and since your A.I. buddies go down more often than a glass-jawed fighter, prepare to stare at the loading screen for a *looooooong* time.

As much praise and hype as *GRAW* PC received—and as gratified as I am that Ubisoft went the extra mile to craft a unique PC version—it could've turned out better. Sure, it has its strengths: huge, wide-open maps, solid multiplayer (especially co-op), great graphics, and a good story. But, taken with its many weaknesses (including some annoying bugs), I don't see how *GRAW* rates better than a fairly good tactical shooter—one that most PC users can't even run. / **Eric Neigher**

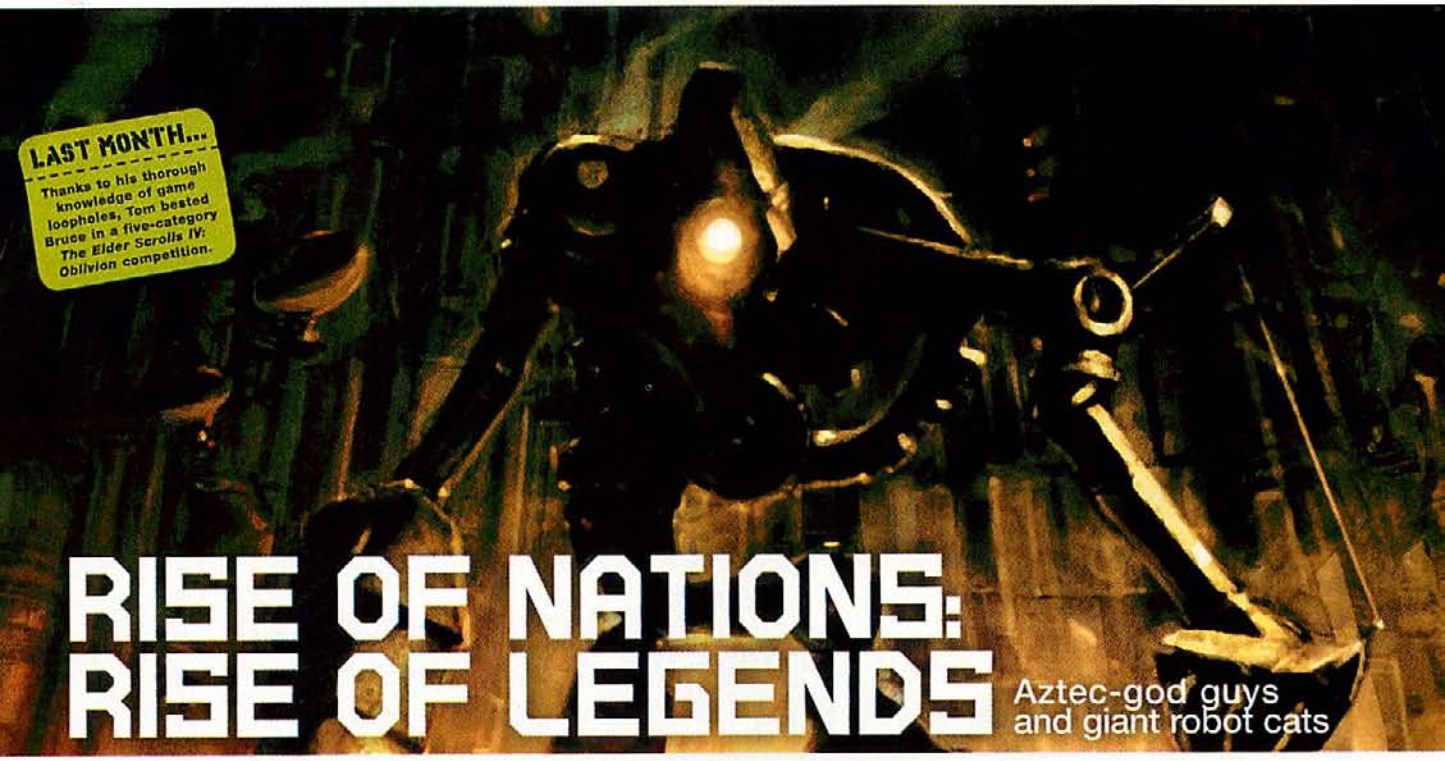
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

I'd like to buy two vowels: "A" and "I."

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	9/10
GAMESPOT	7.8/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	8.1/10

TOM vs. BRUCE



LAST MONTH...
Thanks to his thorough knowledge of game loopholes, Tom bested Bruce in a five-category *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* competition.

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

Aztec-god guys and giant robot cats

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Big Huge Games** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** GENRE: **Real-time strategy**
ESRB RATING: **Teen** REQUIRED: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space**
RECOMMENDED: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players**

BRUCE: THIS MONTH'S INSTALLMENT of Tom vs. Bruce is special, because for absolutely no extra charge, you get a long, involved backstory. It starts with Tom's glee at the release of *Rise of Legends*, progresses through various in-person thrashings when we played during last May's E3 Expo, and continues with loss after online loss by me...at which point I told Tom we were going to have to play *Lego Star Wars* instead. Somewhere in there, we decided it might be more interesting to have us both on the same team. So we played a 3-on-3 game with some people from Tom's website, QuarterToThree.com. And now I'm writing fan fiction about it.

TOM: It's really the only way. *Rise of Legends* is a genre wonk's delight, which means I'm pretty decent at it, and Bruce will forever be hopeless. If you don't believe me, have a look at QuarterToThree.com, where you'll find an article in which Bruce explains that his only frame of context for this brilliant RTS is some weird board game about building a French castle. I am not making this up.

BRUCE: I'm playing the Alin, because their *Arabian Nights* backstory is the easiest for me to understand. I don't even want to start with the Renaissance robots or space Aztecs. You have to build a whole sequence of stuff, including the sand spire that upgrades your mines. But that costs money, so you need to make merchant districts. But that costs minerals, so you have to build miners. But that costs manpower, so you just collectivize the Donbass. If anyone gets that joke, you make sure and let me know.

TOM: Let me know as well.

BRUCE: My understanding is that we're automatically going to win, because Tom is on our side. This should be easy.

TOM: I'm playing the Cuotl in this game. The guy on the other team who really knows what he's doing is John, also Cuotl. His teammates Lee (playing the Vinci) and Dan (playing the Cuotl) slightly know what they're doing. Rounding out the 3-on-3 on our side is Mike (playing the Alin)...who also slightly knows what he's doing. As soon as the game starts, I tell everyone on our team that we want to keep the pressure on John. In order to help them remember this, I simply refer to John as "Blue," which is what you do in an RTS when everyone's too busy to remember who's playing what color.

The map is Condottieri Outlands, in which we all start along an outer ring of cities. Toward the middle of the map lies an inner ring of cities among rich Timonium deposits. The trick is to secure your flanks and push into the middle. Unfortunately, John and Bruce start next to each other, making the security of our left flank somewhat...well, questionable.

BRUCE: Being next to Blue is like being France right next to Germany. I just bought the neutral city that's sitting right between us. I hope that doesn't become a point of diplomatic contention. Buying a city costs money, but it gets you that city's army, which I guess makes up for some of the money. One of you eggheads can figure out the complex economic calculus that accounts for time, minerals spent on repairs, and extra military units.

Now I'm massing a big army next to a second neutral city, which we'll just call Luxembourg. And, holy crap—John is already attacking Luxembourg! Get away, dammit! I'll just have to attack him while he's fighting the neutral dudes.



▲ **Xil, the giant robot cat, is the hero of choice for half of the players.**

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

players



Tom Chick
In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk
Longtime *CGW* contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years; he loves war games like most people love oxygen.



▲ Lee's Giacomo tries to drive Tom and Bruce back, but to no avail.



Tom and Bruce, standing in a ring of fire.

MY UNDERSTANDING IS THAT WE'RE AUTOMATICALLY GOING TO WIN, BECAUSE TOM IS ON OUR SIDE. THIS SHOULD BE EASY.

TOM: I was pushing toward the center to grab one of the middle cities to secure a better Timonium source, but now that Bruce and John are fighting, I'm going to have to divert my army.

BRUCE: Blue has a big god guy and a thing called a Sun Idol. All I have are little Bedouin guys. And now all I have are little Bedouin guys who are on fire. They still do a pretty good job of knocking the Blue god down—which is great, considering they'd have to make a giant Bedouin pyramid just to look him in the face. Oh, yeah? Well, uh...just wait until my friend Tom gets here! He'll show you! Blue wisely decides to get out of town.

TOM: I arrive after John has pulled back, but I park my army here to create a sort of DMZ.

BRUCE: Oh, crap—it's another giant Aztec-god guy! But he's Green, so it's Tom. Hi, Tom! Thanks for dropping by. Can you just cover me while I grab Luxembourg? What? It's a small European country southeast of Belgium. Whatever. Just stand there and keep an eye out. *Merci.*

TOM: John's rebuilt army is moving to capture his closest inner ring city, so Bruce and I descend on it. Well, I descend on it and Bruce hangs back to grab a neutral city before bringing up the rear. I use Xil's Burning Beams to cut through John's Sentinels, but he drops a Star Bolt on me, and then Lee's Vinci fires off an Industrial Devastation. Everyone takes heavy losses, but John can't hold up with two players attacking him.

BRUCE: Our Luxembourg occupation force caught the Blue god and his army. I'm down to a couple of cavalry guys and a lobster. Apparently, the lobster is really good against humans, because he happily pinches away at them. Tom still has a million guys, and that's nice for him.

TOM: After driving John back, Bruce and I are killing a bunch of his miners, when Lee comes rolling up with Giacomo and half a dozen squads of musketeers. Bruce only has two wounded units left—a scorpion and a Condottieri dragoon. And I'm waiting on reinforcements from teching up Zeal, which gives me free Sentinels. It's a close battle, but we hold Lee off. If we'd had to fight John and Lee at the same time, it wouldn't have gone so well...but by taking them on in separate engagements, we're able to win both.

BRUCE: Lee brought along a hero named Giacomo, inventor of mana. That guy invented mana? He must be a billionaire! Anyway, we blew up Giacomo. I guess he ran OOM.

TOM: Really bad news—here comes Dan's army. It's another Cuotl force led by another Xil (the dude's a giant robot cat, so you can understand his popularity). I have a handful of Sentinels, my Xil is badly wounded, and his powers are recharging. What's more, my decimated army is pinned between this fresh force and John's capital. So I run through Dan's army, taking heavy losses, toward where Bruce has built a Glass Citadel. Xil is pretty much the only survivor and Bruce has only a few units. If Dan pushes, we're in trouble.

BRUCE: A neutral city still sits near the center of the map, which is where I guess John was headed before Tom and I lobstered him. But now that Orange has shown up and bushwhacked us, he isn't kidding around. He takes the city without much trouble.

TOM: Fortunately, Dan contents himself with that neutral city. He grabs it and sits there. Time to play the Mike card: Mike has been sitting off on our right flank, bordering Dan's territory and quietly building a huge force. I tell him to go ahead and attack Dan, which will hopefully draw off his army. Then Bruce and I jump in to grab the city Dan had just taken, hoping to find it undefended.

No such luck. Not only is his army still parked here, but he's built a Sanctuary, which is the Cuotl fortress. We fight it out with our Xils: Blinding Armor, Mirror Image, Burning Beams, you name it. John drops his Star Bolt on Bruce's army. Dan and I bang Cuotl armies into each other while Bruce bangs on the city. I have to pull Xil back again. I don't think we're going to take this city—but the good news is that on our right flank, Mike is merrily rolling over Dan's undefended city.

BRUCE: Ow! What was that all about? I don't like turning points, but that may have been a big one right there. Tom's forces (and mine) are decimated, and an Orange wave rolls over my Glass Citadel and toward my cities.





▲ Tom and Bruce counterattack against Dan's city. It doesn't go very well.



Whoa, Lee has a juggernaut! Who's the juggernaut, bitch?!



Mike "McClellan" uses his powerful army to sit and wait.

TOM: Dan doesn't seem to care about losing his city to Mike, as he advances up our left flank, right into Bruce's territory. This time, he's accompanied by Lee's army: Giacomo, a couple of Air Destroyers, and a bunch of Imperial Grenadiers. John even gets a few units into the battle. I lose the forward Fane and Temple I'd built, as well as Xil. It's a massacre. They've knocked down Bruce's defenses, and now the whole mass is moving in on his forward city. The only army I have is the Sentinels I'm about to receive for teching up my Zeal. It won't be enough.

BRUCE: Now the Orange Revolution is at the gates, with some Yellow and Blue mixed in. I think Yushchenko himself is storming it. My capital is the next city in line. If I lose my capital, I'm out of the game. But we still have a page to go!

TOM: It's time to call in Mike again. I tell him that Dan's capital is undefended, right in front of him. "Just waiting for one more siege guy," Mike types. One more siege guy? Does the word "*undefended*" not register?

Thirty seconds later, Mike types "OK" and moves in—with three Glass Cannons instead of just two. Because two never would have done it. Mike "McClellan" rolls forward while Dan's army storms Bruce's city.

BRUCE: Orange takes my forward city and is moving in toward my capital. I guess the rest of this article will be written by Tom.

TOM: Mike "McClellan" slowly attacks a defensive tower with his Glass Cannons while his enormous army loiters around behind them. They're within spitting distance of Dan's capital, and they're not doing anything!

BRUCE: My capital is going down. I start giving Tom my resources to prepare for my impending defeat. I also offer him a few pointers on what to do with the rest of the word count.

TOM: Having knocked over the lone tower, Mike's Glass Cannons finally start firing on Dan's capital. Nearly a full minute later, Mike reduces the city, but still hasn't moved close enough to trigger the capture flag. His army is just sitting there! I tell him to push forward. But since he's taken so long, the army attacking Bruce's city pulls away and heads to the other side of the map to defend Dan's capital.

BRUCE: And then, just as all seems lost, the Orange forces gather, turn around, and head back toward the other side of the map. Saved!

TOM: Dan's army rolls in at Mike, who's finally gotten around to triggering the capture flag on the ruined Orange capital. Mike holds him back, but Lee is close behind. By the time Lee arrives, the capture timer is within pixels of giving Mike the city. At almost literally the last second, Dan resets the timer and starts taking his capital back. Ouch. Mike's army is dead, but at least he's drawn Dan, Lee, and John off.

Then, one second after the 30-minute mark on the timer, the following message appears gloriously across the middle of my screen: "Our City of Vengeance has arrived!" Fifteen seconds later, I get a message that John's started building his own City. Time to move.

BRUCE: Hey, look at that. They're attacking Tom's capital now.

TOM: Yikes...I didn't see that coming. Suddenly, Lee's got three Air Destroyers and some Clockwork Men with Giacomo at my capital. They tear it down and start the capture timer, while my City of Vengeance slows floats back to defend it. Along the way, whom should I meet but no less that five (5!) of John's Elite Sun Idols stomping to reinforce Lee! I use the City of Vengeance's Gravity Wave to stun them and give myself a head start. Once I get to my capital, I park the City and let it do its thing. It eventually thins out Lee's forces enough to swing the capture timer back to me, but then John's Sun Idols start tromping up. I use Reintegrate to heal my battered City, and I barely come out ahead (it's left with 15 health out of a total of 2,600), thanks in part to Bruce's flying hero and Sand Dragon.

BRUCE: That's what I get for helping Tom. Now my capital's getting stormed again, this time by a Blue City of Vengeance. With Tom's capital safe, he sends his forces this way. I also get a brand-new Glass Dragon to add to my flying god and some assorted units. The Blue City of Vengeance doesn't last long.

TOM: While watching the replay, it turns out that John didn't have the energy to heal his City with the Reintegrate power. Hah! Meanwhile, Mike "McClellan" has been left alone long enough to get out his Glass Dragon. Safe in the knowledge that he has a strong enough army, Mike moves back to Dan's capital and takes it, knocking him out of the game and turning his cities over to John.

Now it's time to deal a knockout blow to John before he can build back up. Bruce and I quickly move for the Blue capital; along the way, we pass a city with a pair of Sanctuaries built right next to it. Suspecting an elaborate trap, we ignore it and attack John's capital. While we're capturing it, John types, "You want to know something hilarious? I forgot which city was my capital." Which would explain those two Sanctuary fortresses back there—John accidentally defended the wrong city.

BRUCE: The capital falls, with Yellow left holding the remnants of the Blue empire. We have a huge edge at this point, and it's just a matter of time now. Those attempts to storm our capitals were their last opportunities to turn death into a fighting chance for life.

TOM: I'm not entirely certain, but it sounds a bit like Bruce was actually enjoying himself. He'll probably deny it, but I can briefly imagine Bruce having a grand ol' time playing a wacky real-time strategy game, even if he's not hip to some of its nuances. This is one of the best things about playing team games: It takes—and allows—all types.

"YOU WANT TO KNOW SOMETHING HILARIOUS? I FORGOT WHICH CITY WAS MY CAPITAL."



The Orange wave advances.



Tom's City of Vengeance and Bruce's Glass Dragon chew up the scenery.

REALITY CHECK

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO WHAT WE SAY—AND WHAT THEY SAY—ABOUT THE LATEST IN PC GAMING



BATTLEFIELD 2: ARMORED FURY

We say: "Nothing is bad here, and having planes that are slow enough that the nonelite of *Battlefield 2* can engage them with ground-based weapons is a good change to the core game."
—Patrick Joynt, 1UP.com (7/10)

They say: "While [expansions] and boosters are designed to increase the enjoyment of a game among existing fans, the new cooperative mode might just bring a few new players into the fold."
—IGN (8/10)



CITY LIFE

We say: "*City Life* is the freshest take on the city-sim genre in memory, managing to be both as challengingly complex as its more gearheaded forebears and more accessible to casual or more philosophical players. Nice trick."
—Greg Kramer, 1UP.com (8/10)

They say: "*City Life* isn't quite up to the caliber of the franchise that inspired the vast majority of its design, but it's still a rewarding and enjoyable city-building sim."
—GameSpot (7.8/10)



THE MOVIES: STUNTS & EFFECTS

We say: "Is it worth 30 bucks? If you're heavily invested in its moviemaking tech, the answer is probably, though a 10-dollar shave seems more appropriate since stunt antics add relatively little to the sim game."
—Matt Peckham, 1UP.com (7/10)

They say: "The freecam and the improved prop placement options alone are worth the price, while the props, sets, costumes, and effects merely add to the moviemaking experience."
—GameSpy (3.5/5)



RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

We say: "There's little information available on your units, and no effective way to manage them. Battles are swirling masses of crap animation—more blobs than armies."
—Tom Chick, 1UP.com (5/10)

They say: "Unless you're specifically looking for a game where you can get down into the action and make a difference to the battle in a traditional RTS setting, look elsewhere."
—IGN (6/10)



RUSH FOR BERLIN

We say: "The A.I. rolls over on anything less than Hard, and getting units into tactically feasible formations can be like herding drunken snails. But for hardcore tactical WWII fans, this is everything [the] *Codename: Panzers* series did—only better, and with bells on."
—Matt Peckham, 1UP.com (7/10)

They say: "If any game is capable of convincing genre veterans of shivering their way through the Battle of the Bulge one more time, it's this one."
—GameSpot (7.8/10)



STACKED WITH DANIEL NEGREANU

We say: "For poker beginners who are too shy to jump into the online fray, *Stacked* is a good way to get acquainted with the game in all its forms, from low-limit cash tables to no-limit multitable tournaments."
—Demian Linn, 1UP.com (5/10)

They say: "Unless you're not old enough to play competitive poker on an online gambling site (most of which offer free games as well), it's hard to justify picking this one up."
—GameSpy (2.5/5)

SCORECARD

On store shelves now

GAME	RELEASE	1UP NETWORK	GAMESPOT	GAMESPY	IGN
Battlefield 2: Armored Fury	June 2006	7/10	7.4/10	—	8/10
Black & White 2: Battle of the Gods	April 2006	6/10	7.2/10	—	7/10
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	March 2006	6/10	6.9/10	—	6.8/10
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	April 2006	—	7.9/10	3.5/5	7.8/10
City Life	June 2006	8/10	7.8/10	3/5	—
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	April 2006	5/10	7.3/10	3.5/5	8.2/10
The Movies: Stunts & Effects	June 2006	7/10	7.7/10	3.5/5	8/10
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	June 2006	5/10	6.6/10	2.5/5	6/10
Rush for Berlin	June 2006	7/10	7.8/10	—	—
Stacked with Daniel Negreanu	May 2006	5/10	7.7/10	2.5/5	4.8/10

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE 1UP NETWORK
For more thorough reviews on the latest PC games, point your web browser to cgw.1UP.com today!

DO IT YOURSELF

THAT DUDE WITH THE *GUILD WARS* T-shirt wandering through CompUSA with the thousand-yard stare? He knows it's his time—to buy a new computer. As a gamer, new technologies and new hype constantly surround you. You start thinking you need to drop somewhere between three grand and the GNP of Chile just so you can play *Half-Life 2*—and that's about the time you decide to buy a console instead. But in that direction lies madness.

Sure, one high-end graphics card costs as much as a new console, but you don't really *need* to buy the Nvidia 7,900,000 GTX Super Turbo Nitro Deluxe or ATI Radeon KrissKrossFireWillMakeYouJump X30000. Don't believe us? We built and tested a road-ready gaming rig that'll play even demanding games at HD resolutions (1280x1024) and laid out all the pieces so you can build your own. But first...

THE DISCLAIMER

We've warned you about this before...and we'll continue to warn ya till we're blue in the face: Building a new computer from scratch is no simple undertaking. Entire books and websites exist solely to ease your pain. Yes, you can hold your geek head high knowing you created a Frankenbox. The downside is that you're on your own—no helpful tech support if your system bottoms out, and no warranty to prevent sleepless nights. All right—now that that's out of the way, it's time to break out the tools. And your credit card.

MOTHERBOARD: EVGA NFORCE4 SLI (133-K8-NF41)

Last month, we gave you a motherboard breakdown so hardcore, it'd make Stephen Hawking weep. Sparing you that misery again, here's some quick advice: When building any PC, cheap or expensive, use a motherboard that is stable, expandable, and—god willing—affordable.

So why choose an SLI (Scalable Link Interface) motherboard? Sure, you're not going to run two graphics cards in your $700 computer, but it's nice to know you have the option for future expansion. Grabbing another graphics card in six months might be an inexpensive way to get a serious graphical boot in the ass.

Of course, EVGA's board has all the other expansion bells and whistles you want in a modern motherboard: Gigabit Ethernet, SATA II, rounded cables, and so on. There's one weird quirk, though. This board has *three* PCI Express (PCIe) graphics slots. Two are for the eight-lane (x8) SLI configuration, but if you're using one card (as we are in this build), you plug it into the single x16 PCIe graphics slot that rests between them. This layout uses up the space usually reserved for an additional PCI or x1 PCIe slot. If you don't mind cutting down on expandability, then you won't be sorry with this purchase.



THE SHOPPING LIST

COMPONENT	BRAND / MODEL	PRICE
Motherboard	EVGA nForce4 SLI (133-K8-NF41)	$79
CPU	Athlon 64 3000+ (Socket 939)	$110
Memory	1GB Corsair ValueSelect DDR400 (2x512MB)	$78
Graphics card	EVGA e-GeForce 7600 GT CO	$179
Soundcard	Sound Blaster Audigy 2 Value	$42
Hard drive	Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB	$69
Optical drive	Pioneer DVR-111DBK DVD±RW DL Burner	$45
Case	Antec Sonata II (with 450W power supply)	$91
TOTAL		$693*

*Prices calculated at pricewatch.com and are subject to change. The cost of new monitor, keyboard, mouse, speakers, and copy of Windows XP are not included. After all, you already have that stuff.

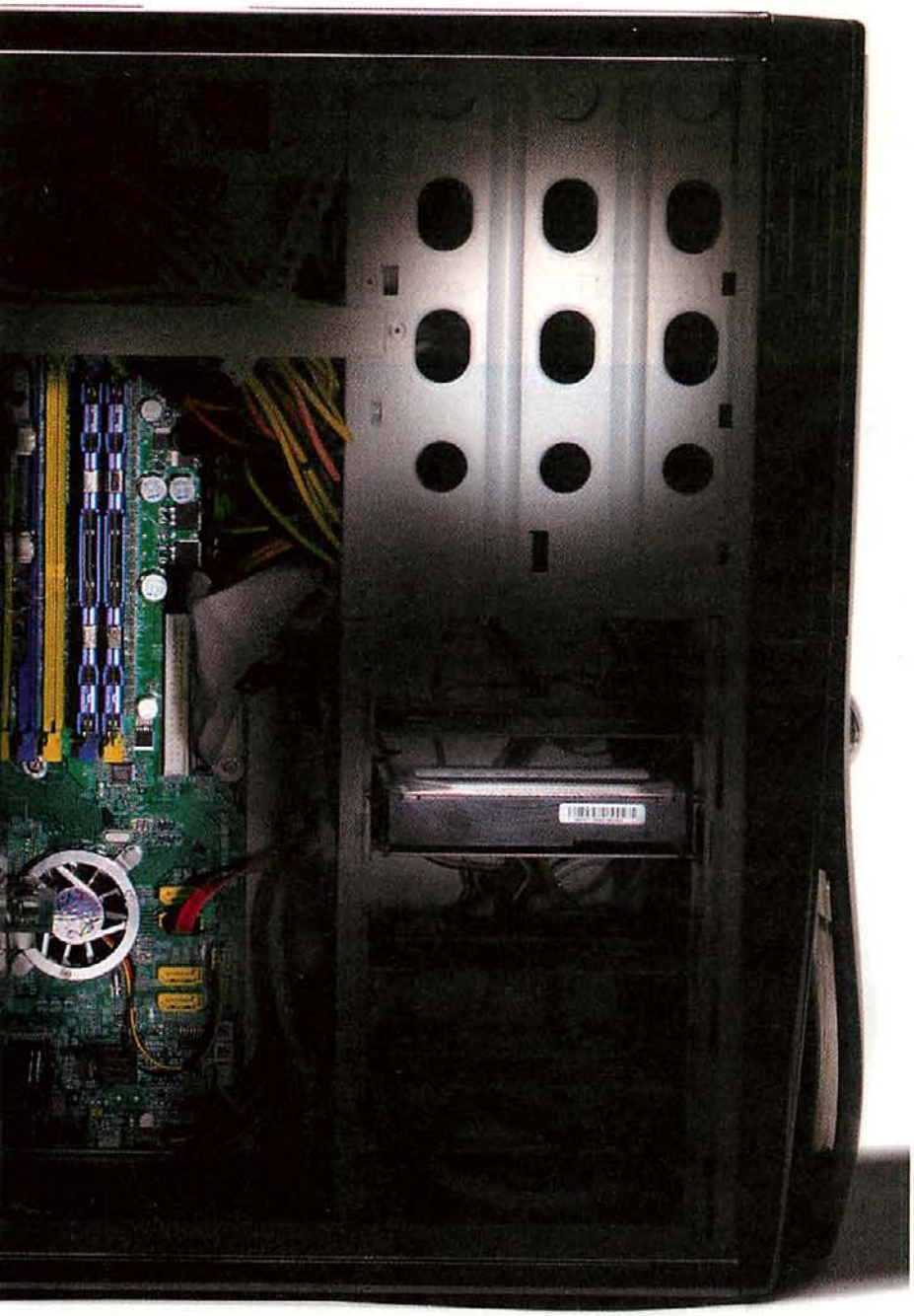
THE $700 GAM



104

Tech Medics
This month:
To DVI or not to DVI—that is the question. Well, that and what the deal is with DirectX 10's impending release.

EXTREME TECH!
Want a hardcore look at all the hardware in this issue? Head over to ExtremeTech.com, where tech experts like Loyd Case and Jason Cross get down to business.



>> YOU DON'T NEED TO SPEND A FORTUNE TO PLAY *HALF-LIFE 2: EPISODE ONE.*

CPU: ATHLON 64 3000+ (SOCKET 939)

When CPU shopping on a shoestring budget, bigger isn't necessarily better. AMD's Athlon 64 3000+ CPU provides solid gaming performance and memory bandwidth—just don't make the mistake of buying the 3000+ Socket 754 CPU. If you wanted to upgrade well beyond the 3000+ in the future, you certainly *could*, but you won't get enough of a performance bump to justify the price. You'd be better off spending the money it costs to buy even a 3200+ CPU on a better graphics card or more RAM.

MEMORY: 1GB CORSAIR VALUESELECT DDR400

RAM prices fluctuate more than gasoline prices, but we still found a good deal on a pair of Corsair ValueSelect DDR400 512MB modules.

In a system this cheap, 1GB of RAM can be a lifesaver. Many games these days benefit from more than 512MB, especially massively multiplayer online games that frequently load a wide variety of textures in areas crowded with unique players. RAM prices continue dropping, but we're probably still a year away from putting 2GB into a PC at our target price.

Kingston, Corsair, OCZ, PNY, Crucial...when it comes to basic DDR400 RAM, it doesn't matter which brand name you buy. So long as it's a brand name. You just need to stay far away from flaky, no-frills junk. The money you save won't make up for all the problems and performance headaches.

GRAPHICS CARD: EVGA E-GEFORCE 7600 GT CO

EVGA's affordable graphics card was a favorite in our recent big honkin' Graphics Card Roundup (see *CGW* #264, pg. 106, or visit http://go.extremetech.com/graphics). For about $179, it gives you enough graphic horsepower to run all the latest games without sacrificing visual quality. You won't be able to tackle high resolutions with antialiasing and anisotropic filtering enabled, but honestly, that's beyond the reach of any $700 PC. Trust us.

SOUNDCARD: SOUND BLASTER AUDIGY 2 VALUE

If you're on a really tight budget, you can skip the soundcard entirely and just use your integrated PC audio. We find that's usually a bad idea, though. The signal-to-noise ratio is typically poor, 3D-audio options are limited, and, since all the processing is host-based,

ING PC

Build a low-budget rig to DIY for

games that use lots of audio channels can slow down a bit.

What you need is a good soundcard. The Sound Blaster Audigy 2 Value buys you the very latest Sound Blaster card—the only game in town that off-loads audio processing from the host CPU—without spending much money. Your games will run faster, and you'll get to use EAX (Environmental Audio Extensions) in games that support it.

HARD DRIVE: SEAGATE BARRACUDA 7200.7 160GB

The seventh-generation Seagate drives aren't quite as nice as the newest ones, but you can still find these online for a good price. In our case, we found a reasonably roomy 160GB SATA drive for only 70 bucks. When you need more room—or if you get your hands on some more money—just add a second drive for additional storage.

OPTICAL DRIVE: PIONEER DVR-111DBK DVD±RW DL BURNER

Pioneer makes great optical drives, and the 111DBK is no slouch. This full dual- and double-layer DVD burner supports both the –R and +R formats, and it can burn speeds up to 40x for CDs, 16x for DVDs, and 8x for DVD-RWs. The drive casing is a little on the long side—not a problem for the system we're building here, but it might be a tight squeeze in a small form-factor PC. These beauties are easy to find for around $45 online, and they come with either beige or black bezels depending upon how you want to pimp your rig.

CASE AND POWER SUPPLY: ANTEC SONATA II

Yes, you can find cheaper cases out there, but we just couldn't pass up a deal this good. For $89, you get a very attractive piano-black case that comes with a beefy 450W power supply—that's enough juice to power this whole rig and maybe a second graphics card when you get more cash. It also runs silently, with an air duct CPU-cooling system that traps some annoying fan noise./

> THIS MACHINE EVEN HAS THE CAJONES TO RUN WINDOWS VISTA AT A DECENT CLIP—WELL, THE BETA, ANYWAY.

PRO TIPS

HOW TO BE A HARDWARE HERO



- When ordering a bare-bones PC from a manufacturer, find out which motherboard lies under the hood. ATX boards are common, and they offer plenty of expandability—but some companies, however, choose to cut corners.
- Buying a prebuilt machine often means loads of useless preinstalled software. Ask if you can buy a clean machine with just the operating system and drivers.
- You want at least a 450-watt power supply providing juice to your system.
- Look for quick-release mechanisms and thumbscrew case designs. It makes for quicker and relatively painless hardware installations and troubleshooting.
- Cleanliness is next to godliness. It may be a pain, but try binding all the cables inside your case with tie-wraps, and route them away from fans. Otherwise, a stray wire can easily jam up your CPU cooling fan.
- Check all of the connections before closing the case. If anything is unseated, the PC won't boot./

PERFORMANCE

NOW THAT WE'VE GIVEN LIFE TO OUR Frankenbox, let's see how our baby runs.

In our PCMark05 benchmark, the rig earned a perfectly respectable score of 3,401—though that's far from the blazing speeds a $1,000 CPU can deliver. Even the hard drive kicks up decent performance. The crazy part? This machine even has the cajones to run Windows Vista at a decent clip—well, the Vista beta, anyway.

In some basic media-encoding tests, our $700 system ran about half as fast as the bleeding-edge setups we use for new motherboards and graphics cards. That hardly comes as a surprise, though—those big rigs cost at least twice as much as this one.

To gauge gaming performance, we ran 3DMark06 four times, topping out at 2,985. But forget numbers. How well does it run games?

We chose to run all our game benchmarks (*Half-Life 2: Lost Coast*, *F.E.A.R.*, *Call of Duty 2*, and *Doom 3*) at 1280x1024 resolution, since 17-inch LCD displays with 1280x1024 native resolutions are very inexpensive—if you don't already have a display, these are good matches for your bargain box.

Each game delivered an average framerate higher than the LCD's refresh rate of 60Hz, except for one. *Call of Duty 2* remains a graphical pain in the keister—it's tough for even the best graphics cards to drive it over 60fps.

Note that we didn't pull any punches in our testing: We ran every game with the same maximum detail settings we use to test new graphics cards, maxed out texture resolutions, cranked lighting detail, boosted reflections, and so on. If you want to make *Call of Duty 2* look and run great on this system, you can just turn the texture resolution down from Extra to High.

DUDE, DO I JUST BUY A DELL?

At what point do you just buy a premade computer instead of building one yourself? You can always spec out a bare-bones machine like we did with Dell's XPS 400 ($810)—but remember that you're also paying for the Dell brand name and their warranty policy. If you're very tech-savvy and looking to save money, try Cyberpower (cyberpowerpc.com), where you can get a machine on par with the one we just designed for about $645 (at press time). Just don't expect the same degree of support you'll get from Dell. In other words, you're on your own.

The beauty of buying a base-level machine is that sometimes you can get better deals, since computer-building companies buy hardware in bulk. On the other hand, you just want that extra safety net of knowing that you have someone to call and complain to at 3 a.m. when something goes wrong. Then, when you finally sell your kidney on eBay, you can afford to seek out and pop in whatever new components you like./

GAME BENCHMARKS



THE PENNY-PINCHER PC

COSTS AS MUCH AS:
A Sony PlayStation 3



WITH SONY'S top-end PlayStation 3 listing for $600, it seems as though consoles are getting as expensive as PCs. But can you build a game-worthy computer for the same price as Sony's upcoming console? The answer is yes, as long as you set your sights a little lower than dual-core CPUs and two graphics cards. And no crazy Cell processor or Blu-ray discs for you, cheapo.

GAMES IT CAN PLAY: Want to help the Horde? *World of WarCraft* plays and looks great on this machine. And so will just about any of the games we tested in our $700 machine.

THE SHOPPING LIST

COMPONENT	BRAND / MODEL	PRICE
CPU	Athlon 64 3000+ (Socket 939)	$110
Motherboard	EVGA nForce4 SLI (133-K8-NF41)	$79
Memory	1GB Corsair ValueSelect DDR400 (2x512MB)	$79
Graphics card	EVGA e-GeForce 7600 GS	$128
Soundcard	Sound Blaster Audigy 2 Value	$42
Hard drive	40GB Western Digital WD400JD	$46
Optical drive	Lite-On CD-RW/DVD-ROM Combo Drive	$26
Case	Antec Sonata II (with 450W power supply)	$91
TOTAL		$601*

A SUB-$600 PC? SURE! SAVE EVEN MORE CASH BY SCAVENGING PIECES FROM YOUR CURRENT RIG.

THE POWER-PLAYER PC



COSTS AS MUCH AS: One-and-a-half refurbished 1988 Yugo GVXs

WHEN SOME FANBOY TELLS YOU that buying a console is a whole lot cheaper than buying a PC, just remind the jerk that in order to get the "as advertised" next-gen-console experience, you have a bunch of hidden costs. You'll probably need to buy a new HDTV and some sort of home theater system. Hell, you can buy a used car for less. That's when you realize $1,700 for a solid gaming system doesn't seem like such a bad deal after all.

GAMES IT CAN PLAY: Just about anything that you can currently throw at it. This machine will also be able to handle big upcoming games like *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.

THE SHOPPING LIST

COMPONENT	BRAND / MODEL	PRICE
CPU	Athlon 64 X2 4400+	$465
Motherboard	Asus M2N32-SLI Deluxe	$239
Memory	2GB Corsair XMS2 Twin2X2048-6400PRO	$240
Graphics card	PNY Verto GeForce 7900 GTX	$399
Soundcard	X-Fi XtremeMusic	$115
Hard drive	Seagate 7200.9 160GB	$69
Optical drive	Pioneer DVR-111DBK DVD±RW DL Burner	$45
Case	Antec Sonata II (with 450W power supply)	$91
TOTAL		$1,663*

THE HIGHLY UNSCIENTIFIC "GETTING YOUR GAME ON" METER



*Prices calculated at pricewatch.com and are subject to change. Also, keep in mind that the cost of new monitor, keyboard, mouse, speakers, and copy of Windows XP are not included. After all, you already have that stuff, right?

HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech



▲ StarForce was causing problems with Vista. Recent drivers "fixed" that.



▲ *Oblivion* runs great—even in some crazy "Flip 3D" window.

VISTA'S BETA BREAKDOWN

THINK YOU GOT IT BAD NOW? *YOU* TRY juggling IRQ conflicts to play *Crusader: No Remorse* sometime. Pfheh! Kids today. While Windows XP may be a bloated operating system, gamers have fewer headaches to deal with than they did in the past. Microsoft aims to slash your Tylenol budget even further with its new OS, Windows Vista. But how?

First, the Windows Game Explorer attempts to break down entry barriers with a simple interface; like Windows Media Player, it even downloads box art and ratings info for your installed games; in the background, WINSAT (Windows System Assessment Tool) quietly tweaks your gameplay settings according to hardware needs. And when DirectX 10 finally rolls out with Vista's launch, expect completely new levels of eye candy.

While that all *sounds* great, we got these promises almost a year ago with the arrival of the first beta. When Beta 2 finally showed up, we spent a full week throwing everything we could at the new OS. Our initial prognosis: We're happy with where Vista is right now—and where it's going—but there's still a lot of work to be done.

All the major gaming features we mentioned earlier are in basic working order, and considering that we probably won't see Vista on store shelves until early 2007, Microsoft has plenty of time to fill in the gaping potholes. This leaves only a few problems to work out between Microsoft, the gamemakers, and the hardware-driver creators.

We've run into two big problems with Beta 2, the first involving StarForce copy protection. StarForce's reliance on a hidden Ring 0 (highly privileged, in CPU parlance) driver causes a compatibility problem that prevents StarForce-protected games from loading—at least, that's the best explanation we could come up with for the errors we found. Will this be the final nail in the coffin for the controversial content-protection scheme? *[Apparently not. Just before we went to press, we found out that the StarForce folks have "fixed" the driver issue. Great.—Ed.]*

The second big problem is performance. Though many games run well and often "feel" the same as they do under Windows XP, we experienced a performance drop several times when running games under Vista. The drop varies from game to game, but it seems as though antialiasing and anisotropic filtering cause the biggest performance hits; we suspect that most of these issues are driver-related. Both Nvidia and ATI have acknowledged that their Vista drivers aren't performance-optimized yet, so if you're running games in Beta 2, watch for new video and audio drivers. In the meantime, do what we did: Cram in 2GB of RAM to make things run smoothly.

THE VISTA TEST GAUNTLET

For our Vista Beta 2 shakedown run, we installed the 32-bit version of the OS on a reasonably high-end machine (Athlon 64 FX-62 CPU, 2GB of RAM, and an ATI Radeon X1900 XTX graphics card) and spent a full week testing stability—installing 200MB patches, ratcheting up the features, monkeying with video settings, running games in windows. Oh, yeah—then we actually played the games. Here are some of the results.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Oblivion performed beautifully from the start; we even managed to run the game in a window with all the fancy graphics options enabled. Things got a little choppy once we hit the great outdoors due to some excessive hard-drive access—but that was nothing 2GB of RAM couldn't fix.

HALF-LIFE 2

The (*Lost*) coast is clear when it comes to Steam. We were able to download and play Source-based games from Valve's content-delivery system without a hitch. However, we're still unsure of how Vista's Games Explorer will work with these games. Will it list all Steam games individually? If so, how will it handle ratings? For now, nothing appears in the Games Explorer at all.

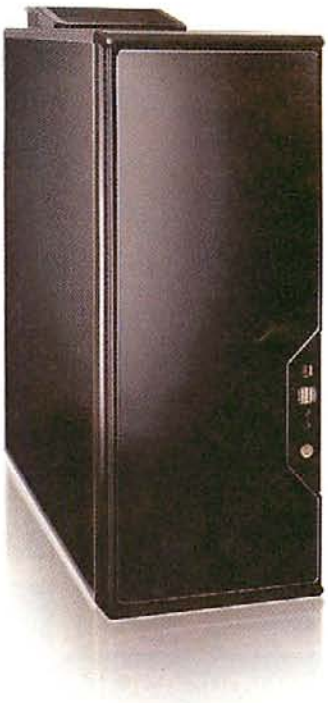
F.E.A.R.

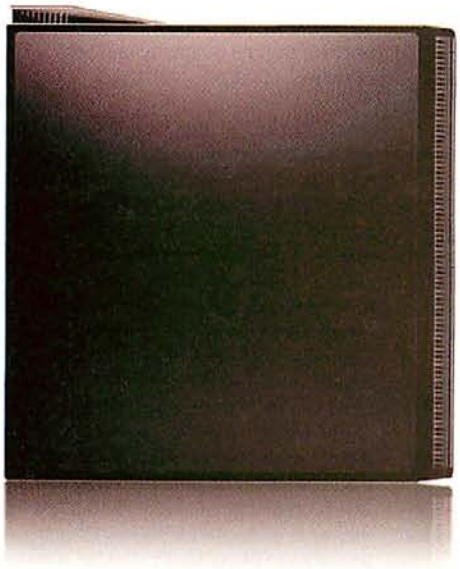
F.E.A.R. is already a notorious system hog, but with an unoptimized OS, it's a voracious beast. When we ran the built-in benchmark at 1280x960 with all the visual detail levels maxed out (but no antialiasing and anisotropic filtering enabled), we saw a whopping 30 percent drop in performance against a similarly configured Windows XP machine (though our average frame rate was still around 60fps). Enabling 4x antialiasing and 8x anisotropic filtering only made the situation worse: The framerate dropped from an average of 70 fps down to a pitiful 32.

RISE OF LEGENDS

Of all the games we tested, we expected the most recently released game from Microsoft Game Studios to run smoothly and appear in the Games Explorer. It didn't do either. Throughout play, the upper left corner of the screen constantly flickered—very distracting. It's hard to say if this is an ATI driver problem, a Vista problem, or a game problem. All we know is that it very difficult to take down an Alin city when you're having an epileptic fit every 20 or so seconds.







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EXTREMETECH

TECH MEDICS

Don't know your ASCII from a hole in the ground? Ask ExtremeTech's Jason Cross

Q: My question is kinda dumb, but I want to make sure I'm doing this right. I have both analog and DVI connections on my monitor and graphics card; I have a Sceptre 19-inch flat. Do I connect both the analog and DVI cables? I prefer DVI, as the picture is better, but some of my games get the "out of frequency" blinking—even though I have the resolution set correctly. How can I correct this issue as well?

Darryl Jackson

A: There are no dumb questions...well, maybe there are—but this is definitely not one of them. You only need to connect either the DVI or the VGA plug, not both—your monitor will only show the input from one of them at a time. So, go ahead and live it up with the higher-quality DVI output.

I'm not sure why your games are giving you an "out of frequency" message on your monitor. It could be that, with both plugs connected, your graphics card thinks you're plugging in two monitors—and when you fire off a game, you're really looking at the "secondary display," which the game doesn't support. Going to a single cable from your graphics card to the monitor would fix that. Another problem may be that your game is set to a resolution (and/or refresh rate) that your monitor doesn't support. Safety tip of the day: Make sure you have the latest drivers for your graphics card—and, when possible, always run games at your monitor's native resolution (in your case, I bet it's 1280x1024).

Q: The new big game for 2007 already looks like Crysis. As a huge fan of FPS titles, I want to be ready. This is where you guys come in: What do I have to upgrade to get smooth gameplay and beautiful graphics from that cutting-edge game? My system: Athlon 64 3000+ CPU, 1GB RAM, GeForce 7800 GTX OC, 120GB hard drive.

Jude

A: To be honest, we can't really say what Crysis' system requirements will be. The game is still very much a work in progress, and there's still some engine development and optimization left before release. Certainly, since PC hardware keeps getting faster, it'll run best on whatever the fastest stuff is just before release. It seems as though your computer will meet the minimum requirements but, if we had to guess, we'd say you might want a little more RAM. Crysis should support some extranifty features with DirectX 10, but that will require a DX10 graphics card (not on the market until at least the later part of 2006) and Windows Vista (DX10 will only be available as part of Vista). Don't go buying anything now in anticipation of the game, though. PC hardware just gets faster and cheaper with time, so you'll get a lot more bang for your buck if you wait to upgrade until the game is almost out.

Q: When DX10 comes out, am I going to have to upgrade my XFX GeForce 7800GT? Please say no!

Zach Geisel

A: NO! Hey, you did say "please." Actually, Zach, did you and Jude get together to write your questions? The short version is that your games will work, but DX10 requires upgrading. For the full DX10 effect, you'll need to upgrade both your graphics card (again, DX10 graphics cards won't be out until later in 2006) and your operating system (again, DX10 is Windows Vista only). If you don't upgrade, no problem—you can still play the games in their DX9 mode; they'll work just fine. Virtually all PC games through 2007 and into 2008 will have DX9 modes.

Q: I'm going to upgrade soon (maybe by mid-August), and I was wondering whether getting the Opteron 170 or AMD Athlon 64 X2 4400+ would be best for gaming. It's also unlikely that I'll do any overclocking of either of them.

Steven Scott

A: Opterons are generally meant for servers and industrial-class workstations—machines that have particular reliability needs with regard to 24/7 operation, support for ECC RAM, and stuff like that. For a consumer desktop system, you'll always get more performance for your dollar out of the consumer line (Athlon). But, hey, you're not upgrading until August or so, right?

Stay tuned. By that time, you may be able to build a system using Intel's upcoming Conroe chip (probably named Core 2 Duo, similar to the notebook Core Duo, but with a "2"). It's a completely new architecture, and the early word is that it'll really give AMD a run for its money in game performance. Of course, if you're just talking about sticking a new CPU into a motherboard you already have, just get the Athlon 64 X2 4400+.

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

ON FILEFRONT

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PC DEMOS

After you've read our interview with adventure-game legend Tim Schafer on page 44, download and play classic demos of *Psychonauts*, *Full Throttle*, *Grim Fandango*, and more.

FileFront

Computer Gaming World **has joined forces with FileFront.com to bring you the best possible PC-gaming editorial and access to the top gaming downloads, including demos, mods, drivers, and more. Of course, if you need a nudge as to what to grab, we'll happily point you in the right direction within these pages. Check out these hot picks from the FileFront editors, then head to cgw.filefront.com to download them.**



PREY

Walk on ceilings, travel through space-bending portals, and otherwise defy the laws of nature in this FPS. The demo lets you try the single- and multiplayer modes.



SENSIBLE SOCCER

Catch the bug of the world's most popular sport with this cel-shaded demo, which lets you play a match between England and Argentina.



HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

Agent 47 returns. Sample the first level of this twisted assassin-fest (complete with tutorial) as you track down your target in a theme-park-turned-drug-lab.



PENUMBRA

Read all about this physics-technology-project-turned-horror-game on page 28, then download the demo and prepare to be scared—by science!



RUSH FOR BERLIN

Use your RTS skills to take out the Third Reich in an alternate reality. Check out this demo's two multiplayer levels, Killing Fields and Black Forest.

CARS

Relive Pixar's latest CG flick. Get behind the wheel of speed racer Lightning McQueen as you sample one of the tracks inspired by the film.

SPACE COWBOY

Download the online game client for this massively multiplayer online space shooter—and, while you're waiting, check out page 28 to find out what it's all about.

BASE INVADERS

Set traps, construct walls, and gleefully hurl your enemies across the screen in this fast and frantic *Dungeon Keeper*–style strategy game.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION: MYTHS AND LEGENDS WEAPONS V1.1.4 (MOD)

Add seven unique weapons to the realm of Cyrodiil, each with its own unique story line to follow.

BATTLEFIELD 2 MERCENARIES V8.0 (MOD)

Those *Mercenaries* modders are at it again with their latest creation. (Please note: This mod only works with *Battlefield 2* v1.3 or later.)

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V V1.1 (PATCH)

Upgrade your game to v1.1, which features autopatching and a new easy mode. This update also squashes a number of bugs that plagued the original release.

CALL OF DUTY 2 V1.3 (PATCH)

This patch fixes various multiplayer game and level issues, raises the game state from 16k to 128k, and addresses an issue with the PunkBuster GUID.

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AGE OF RISING LEGENDS II: THE MANUAL!



INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on your purchase of *Age of Rising Legends II: The Sword of Xanthor*! This all-new real-time fantasy strategy game is the sequel to *Age of Rising Legends I: The Blade of Xanthor*, the award-winning real-time fantasy strategy game that took you where literally no real-time fantasy strategy game had ever taken you before: to the magical kingdom of Xythysyllfyx! It has been 8 million years since Lord Xanthor was felled by Thelia the Elf Queen inside the frozen temple atop Mt. Mung. This event would have cataclysmic repercussions throughout the known—and even unknown—universe. Worst of all, it decided the fate of the tiny-yet-noble people of Vöm who, because of Xanthor's death, would live forevermore in a sunless world with bad plumbing and a shortage of decent gelato.

Now, a new danger arises. A magical bolt of blue lightning has struck the tomb of Xanthor, reanimating his corpse and enchanting his blade with the legendary essence of Ulb. Whoever controls the blade controls the universe, and so the race is on amongst the various races of Xythysyllfyx —the warlike Yutz, the magick-wielding Fae, and the mystic she-ninjas of Pune. Rally your troops, build your cities, and fill your inventory slots with luncheon meat, because the search is on…for the Sword of Xanthor!

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

To install *Age of Rising Legends II*, you will need at least a 2.4GHz Pentium 4 processor, 2GB RAM, and 4GB hard disk space. To actually *play* the game, you will need an IBM Blue Gene supercomputer with a minimum speed of at least 280 teraflops. If you experience hang-ups, crashes to the desktop, or fatal system errors, make sure you have the latest drivers, whatever that means. Please visit the websites of all the vendors of the pieces of your PC to see if they can help you, because we have no clue.

INSTALLATION

To install *Age of Rising Legends II*, insert the DVD into the DVD drive. The installation should begin automatically. If it doesn't, remove the disc from the drive, blow on it and wipe it with your shirt, and then try again. If this still doesn't work, bang once on your monitor and yell, "C'mon!" If this *still* doesn't work, return it and buy the Xbox version. CD-ROM users should install Disc 1 first, and then follow the above procedure for Discs 2 through 12. When Disc 10 fails, please restart the installation over from Disc 1, and repeat. Then buy the Xbox version.

Once installed, the game must be activated at our website at swordofxanthor.org (allow up to five days for activation) for an additional $9.99. After activation, and before playing for the first time, please log in at swordofxanthor.org/login and create your player account (allow up to 10 days to log on to server due to crashes and overcrowding).

CREATING YOUR CHARACTER

In *Age of Rising Legends II: The Sword of Xanthor*, you have the opportunity to create your own completely unique hero. Are you a blue-haired, green-eyed Yutz…or perhaps a green-haired, blue-eyed Fae? With up to two hairstyles and eye colors to choose from, the possibilities are literally endless. For those players who would rather "jump right in" without creating their own character, we provide two premade characters that you can use: A blue-haired, green-eyed Yutz and a green-haired, blue-eyed Fae.

STARTING A GAME

Now that you've created your character, you are ready to start the game. Congratulations!

To start a new game, click "New Game" from the main menu. The opening movie fills you in on every single thing that's happened in the 8 million years since the events in *Age of Rising Legends I*. You cannot skip it, as we spent 80 percent of our budget on it and don't want you to miss it, even though with all that money we still couldn't figure out how to get the characters' mouths to move or the eyes to not have that weird, glazed-over zombie look.

PLAYING THE GAME

The single-player campaign consists of 15 individual missions, each with its own unique and exciting challenges, such as unbalanced maps, a dearth of adequate resources, unclear mission goals, and an A.I. that cheats. Good luck!

To play, create a bunch of buildings and units, then search on the map for enemy forces and kill them. Each race has several specialized units with unique abilities and spells, but the best strategy is to click frantically on whatever random units you've created, click on the enemy, and then see what happens.

WINNING THE GAME

The game ends when you successfully capture the Sword of Xanthor, or when you uninstall the game and resell it for a profit to some unsuspecting loser on eBay.

Good luck, everyone. We'll see you in another 8 million years for *Age of Rising Legends III: The Dagger of Xanthor*! / **Jeff Green**



What Jeff doesn't realize is that Sword of Xanthor is actually the third game in the series. Correct this egregious continuity error at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com

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PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

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